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The need for inclusion in today's schools is a topic of discussion among scholars and practitioners. This discourse offers a range of understandings of what inclusion is and how it should look in practice. Despite the continuous conversation, a gap exists in research exploring how practicing administrators define and understand inclusion in order to lead. This study uses a generic qualitative methodology to explore this limitation in knowledge further. The purpose of this study is to examine principals' perspectives and thoughts on inclusion by looking at their personal definitions of inclusion and their leadership actions. In this study, seven principals serving in elementary schools and one exceptional children's administrator in the same school district were interviewed. Additionally, two principals were selected from the seven to be observed in their schools. The two principals had a second interview, which included the discussion of scenarios. The study unearthed themes related to how principals develop their personal definitions of inclusion, how and why they change their personal definitions, and how the school district's definitions of inclusion and policies related to inclusion impact principals. The participants could verbalize their personal definitions of inclusion, explain how they were formed, and discuss how definitions changed over time, although their inclusive definitions differed. Participants understand why the district expects inclusion but did not have a true example of how inclusion should look in practice due to the elusiveness of the district's definition of inclusion. Participants had mixed feelings about federal and state requirements such as high stakes testing and their effects on how they live their inclusive

definition. Participants provided clear examples of how they shared their definition of inclusion with staff members and with the parents of students who have individual education plans. However, most were unable to state how they shared their inclusive thinking with the families of students who do not receive special education services or with the greater community. Analysis of the data from this study provided significant implications for principals, school districts, parents, and colleges and universities. Knowledge from this study provided some information to lessen the gap, but it also highlighted the continued need for research on how principals understand inclusion and lead.

HOW ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS DEFINE INCLUSION AND  
USE THEIR DEFINITION TO LEAD

by

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Approved by

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Committee Chair

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I dedicate this dissertation to my courageous daughter Brooke who was the inspiration for this study and to my vibrant son David who helped to solidify the necessity of my research. They gave me the desire to push forward by reminding me daily of the need to advocate for the rights of all children to receive a quality education. Brooke, I have finally completed my book about you.

## APPROVAL PAGE

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **A Personal and Professional Concern**

Leadership for inclusive elementary schools is a research interest for me due to my personal and professional experiences in the world of public education. Therefore, I begin my dissertation by sharing my perspectives.

#### **Teaching Experiences**

As a third-year teacher in 2003, I experienced one of the greatest challenges of my elementary teaching career. I was promoted from a second-grade teacher to a third-grade teacher and the world of high stakes testing. Similar to many other novice teachers, I fell into the trap of listening to summaries of my students from their previous teachers. This was not a beneficial practice in my particular case because I was immediately filled with fears that I would not be able to meet the diverse needs of my students and that they would not be able to pass the North Carolina End-of-Grade (EOG) tests. Nonetheless, I studied, planned, and prepared an inviting classroom to greet my new students.

My third-grade class that year consisted of 29 third-grade students from various nationalities with a wide array of academic abilities and skillsets, ranging from emerging to avid readers. Ten of my students received English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) services due to their limited language proficiency; nine students received services from our resource teachers and had Individual Education Plans (IEP); one of my

students, Marco, received both ESOL and EC services. I had my work cut out for me. I had never worked harder, and I do not think that I have since. I was determined to meet the needs of all of my students. I did this by enlisting the help of parents, the resource teacher, and the ESOL teacher. My room was always lively due to small group instruction, which I was able to provide due to the push-in model I begged my principal to let me try. With this model, I was able to plan and meet the needs of my students with the help of my grade level team whom I met with almost daily and the push-in teachers who co-planned and taught with me for at least an hour or more each day. I know that the students would not have had a successful year without soliciting the help of all stakeholders due to the possibility of all of the pullout sessions for my students. The parents offered me so much information about the strengths, weaknesses, and motivations of their children. Mrs. Barnes, the resource teacher, taught me about how to truly use the IEP to plan instruction for individual students as well as a plethora of research-based intervention strategies to meet the needs of ALL of my students. Ms. Thomas, the ESOL teacher, taught me strategies to use to include my ESOL students, such as pre-teaching to build background knowledge, making connections to various cultures, and using pictures and even movements in my lessons. Most importantly, Ms. Thomas taught me the value of regarding what all parents could offer and how to build strong relationships with them. Mrs. Camp, my principal, was extremely important in this endeavor because she worked with me to ensure all of the students' IEP goals were met during this push-in time. She was also present and knowledgeable during my many IEP meetings that year.



This third-grade class I taught provided me with the opportunity to meet the challenge head-on of including and serving all students. It taught me much more than any book that I had read up to that point about exceptional education and my job of providing a fair and appropriate education for ALL students. All of my students experienced growth that year, even if they did not meet the EOG bar.

### **From Teacher of Students to Parent**

My daughter Brooke was born with a bilateral hearing loss due to Mondini Malformation. A Mondini Malformation is a defect of the inner ear, and individuals with this defect have one and a half coils of cochlea instead of two. During her formative years, we worked hard to close language gaps with the assistance of teachers of the hearing impaired, speech-language teachers, and a play therapist. As a result, Brooke made great progress and bridged many gaps before entering kindergarten. However, Brooke still had educational deficiencies, which required her to retain her IEP when she entered public school. I was apprehensive as an educator about how she would fit into the culture of the school as the only student out of almost 500 with a hearing loss or impairment. As an educator, I know the difficulty firsthand of trying to meet the needs of all students within a class. It is a difficulty that becomes even more monumental when considering an entire school. I have seen many students become invisible due to their differences, despite the best intentions of well-meaning teachers and principals who are more often than not doing the best they can with the knowledge they have about special education or particular disabilities, as in the experience I shared earlier. Still, I was optimistic and somewhat comforted because Brooke still had her IEP in place, which

provided her with speech and lessons with a teacher of the hearing impaired (HI) and because my husband and I are parent advocates. However, I was and I am still troubled by the faces of the millions of other students who differ from their peers and who do not meet the norms expected for ‘typical’ students, especially those students who are marginalized due to a disability or exceptionality. Who will make sure they are included and that they receive a quality education? Are there schools and principals who embody this calling of truly including ALL students?

### **Statement of the Problem**

The term at-risk is often used to discuss or describe various groups of learners who show exceptionality in some way (Kretschmer, 1997; Te Riele, 2006). Students who are included in one of the disability categories recognized under IDEA are often deemed at-risk due to their unique needs (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012). My daughter is just one of the faces included due to her hearing impairment. Through her membership in the hearing impaired, deaf, or hard of hearing culture, she is seen by the mainstream culture as an outsider, marginalized, and at-risk of academic failure in a way that I cannot truly understand as a person with full hearing. The other faces of students who receive special services and do not match or meet the norms set by schools are varied and legally included in one or more of the following IDEA categories: autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairment, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, specific learning disability, speech-language impairment, and traumatic brain injury (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012).

These differences have led to grave implications for the schooling, and ultimately the learning of students who exhibit risk factors especially in the world of high stakes testing ushered in by No Child Left Behind (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2019; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012; Sumbera, Pazey, & Lashley, 2014). Regardless of the cause, at-risk students are sometimes ostracized by schools and the educational system because students do not understand, nor can they meet the standardized or understood norms of schools. As such, students are unfavorably labeled as at-risk, marginalized, slow-learners, and bluntly inferior. These labels help reveal just how rooted the classification or categorization of difference is embedded throughout schools and their structures (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008; Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001).

Schools often respond to IDEA mandates by including students from recognized categories into regular education classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers. However, this inclusion attends to the social and physical inclusion of students by making sure they are in the classroom and that all of special requirements regarding their physical needs are addressed. However, so often the real purpose of IDEA is missed entirely. IDEA aims to attend to the academic needs of all students and to ensure that not only do students have access to the grade-level standards, but that they are also equipped with the knowledge and skills to meet the demands of the standards.

Some at-risk students are more included or accepted. Studies have shown that student inclusion is related to the nature of their differences. Students exhibiting differences more closely aligned with school norms or characteristics are more integrated

into the classroom environment (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). This simply means students who are able to follow classroom and school rules such as sit quietly, raise your hands to speak, and follow directions the first time are the students who are more often than not seen as a hindrance to teachers and to the school, even if their academics are not up to par. My daughter Brooke fits into this category. She is a teacher pleaser who tries hard to fit into the classroom without drawing special attention to her hearing differences. This means she depends more heavily on her personal coping skills, which include reading lips and making inferences about what is said by the teacher or others instead of simply asking them to repeat directions or questions. This is only seen as an issue by her teachers if these coping strategies fail her and she does something incorrectly. Nonetheless, for her, as for many other students, differentiation for her specific needs are often not considered, which leads to questions related to true integration. Are there educators in schools who change instruction to be more inclusive of students who have differences and who want to stop the cycle of ignoring or even blaming the victim?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the thought processes and perspectives of principals who practice leadership for inclusion by looking at their personal understandings of inclusion. The intersection of leadership and inclusion offers great research potential in efforts to understand better how practicing principals balance leadership for inclusion (Artiles & Kozleski, 2016; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). School-level leadership is essential to the creation and sustainability of schools that meet the needs of all students while attending to not only their academic needs but also their social

and emotional needs (DeMatthews et al., 2019). As such, it is imperative for educators to understand the processes principals use and consider daily to meet the traditionally recognized managerial needs of schools while also being cognizant of the needs of students with special needs due to disabilities.

School level administrators are tasked with ensuring systems within the school are balanced while also attending to outside influences such as the directives of the school system or district, state and federal guidelines, families of students, and community stakeholders. It is imperative to delve into how principals resolve possible tensions and how and why they make decisions in the interest of all students. This study strives/attempts/endeavors to tap into the thoughts of elementary principals.

### **Research Questions**

Specifically, in my study I investigated the following research questions:

1. How do principals define and understand inclusion?
2. How do principals actualize or live their definition of inclusion?
  - a. How does the context of high stakes testing affect their ability to live out their definition of inclusion?
  - b. How do principals align their personal definition of inclusion with district expectations?
  - c. How do principals share their definitions of inclusion with the staff and the community?

**Background Context:**  
**The Job of Principals and Their Role in Including All Children**

Principals can and do play an important role in ensuring that their schools serve all children. The job of principals in schools of today is complex (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2013; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). The principal is responsible for the implementation of state and federal educational policies, which is a fulltime job in itself (Garrison-Wade, 2005; Rousmaniere, 2013). These requirements task principals with ensuring that the needs of every student are met. This includes students with and without disabilities due to No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally, & McLeskey, 2018; Sumbera et al., 2014). Additionally, they are tasked with overseeing the day-to-day operations within a school, including building maintenance and operation, staff supervision and evaluations, and most importantly the educational and overall welfare of the students in their charge while maintaining communication with the district or central office (Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007). Today's principals, often without special preparation on how to meaningfully serve all students, also have to navigate through the complex political landscape filled with the special interest landmines of school stakeholders (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Garrison-Wade, 2005; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Rousmaniere, 2013; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). Nonetheless, transformative leaders find ways to inspire change necessary to ensure the curriculum is being delivered and differentiated effectively to all students (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001; Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012).

The role of the principal in developing school culture and leading change is imperative. Existing research literature demonstrates that principals significantly affect student outcomes and success, even though the effects are indirect (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018; Spillane & Lee, 2014; Waters, Marano, & McNulty, 2003). As such, it seems that the ultimate responsibility for student learning is on the principal. Thus, principals' perceptions regarding the inclusion of all students into schools are vital. This belief helps move the school's culture toward enabling the inclusion of all students or allowing exclusion of some or many students. A principal who values including all students helps to create structures and supports which ease classroom teachers' burden of meeting the needs of all students. Such structures may include arranging the schedule to allow resource teachers to push in, making sure the building is accessible for all students, providing needed instructional materials, and providing professional development based on the needs of the students and teachers (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Crockett, 2007). Continuous encouragement from the principal is also instrumental in including all students by creating positive attitudes around the subject in addition to challenging teachers to move beyond deficit thinking through crucial conversations.

### **Brief Statement of Methods**

I conducted generic qualitative research (Lichtman, 2013). I interviewed elementary school administrators and district-level administrators to investigate their working definitions of inclusion and how they tried to incorporate and actualize this definition while leading for inclusion within elementary schools. I gathered additional information by observing principals in action in their schools. Through my study, I

unearthed themes related to how principals develop their personal definitions of inclusion, how and why they change their personal definitions, and how the school district's definitions of and policies related to inclusion impact principals.

### **Conceptual Framework: Standards for Leadership for Inclusion**

The standards for administrators for special education who lead for inclusion serves as the conceptual framework for my study. The Professional Standards for Administrators of Special Education were developed by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) in conjunction with other agencies (Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado, 2009). There are six standards which include:

- Standard 1: Leadership and Policy
- Standard 2: Program Development and Organization
- Standard 3: Research and Inquiry
- Standard 4: Evaluation
- Standard 5: Professional Development and Ethical Practice
- Standard 6: Collaboration.

The above standards were derived from an earlier version consisting of more teacher-centered standards using an extensive process; these standards are grounded in general and special education leadership traditions. The 2009 standards serve as broad guidelines that can be used to help in the development of a vision, to develop policy, and to provide guideposts for schools, school districts, and universities (Boscardin et al., 2009). The standards are more specifically developed for district-level administrators, but the standards offer guidance for school principals as well. Effective leaders for inclusion



highly value the importance of maintaining a knowledge base of current and best practices and keeping abreast of the present literature and research, school law, and pending legislation as encouraged by the above standards (Billingsley et al., 2018; Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Guzman, 1996). In Chapter V, I revisit the six standards that constitute my conceptual framework and consider how they relate to the participants' thinking and actions towards inclusion in elementary schools.

### **Significance of the Study**

Inclusion in schools has been and continues to be a topic of interest in the United States due to the continued need to solidify desired characteristics and responsibilities of building-level administrators (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Little is known about how principals think about or define inclusion despite the push by researchers, policies, laws, and inclusion advocates (Billingsley et al., 2018). This study provides a glimpse into the daily actions and decision-making processes surrounding the implementation of inclusion in elementary schools. This study will add to existing knowledge through the analysis of interviews, observations, and scenario discussions. Gained information can be used in the revisions of the standards for leadership for inclusion, taking both special education leadership and overall leadership standards into consideration. Specifically, the study offers implications for building-level administrators, the district, principal preparation institutions, and well as needed information surrounding how school leaders define inclusion.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I provided a glance into my experiences with inclusion as an educator and a mother. I discussed the faces of students who have been and are currently identified as at-risk, marginalized, and who are sometimes not included using research. I also discussed existing research related to the job of principals in schools and the role they play in including all children in instruction. Additionally, I briefly discussed the Standards for Administrators of Special Education as a framework for my study.

In Chapter II, I share existing research on the roles of principals in inclusion and their perception and understanding of inclusion, the definition of inclusion, and what IDEA has to share about inclusion. Additionally, leadership standards will be discussed for administrators including standards particularly created for administrators who lead schools with students who receive special education services. In Chapter III, I explain my research method, data collection process, and data analysis process for this study. In Chapter IV, I reveal the findings from my study, including participant quotes, descriptions from my observations, and participant responses to the scenarios I presented them. Finally, in Chapter V, I share my analysis of the findings, revisit my conceptual framework, address research questions, and present implications of my study for school districts, administrators, parents, and researchers.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

There have always been students in America's schools labeled as slow, delinquent, or incapable of learning (Deschenes et al., 2001). Therefore, addressing the needs of students who exhibit differences has been and continues to be a concern of educators (Grove & Fisher, 1999). Educators have identified characteristics of students and groups of students whom they feel cannot learn efficiently using traditional methods. Students who find membership in this often-marginalized subset include, but are not limited to, students who are recognized by the IDEA umbrella. This concern has found many differing solutions and has been heavily researched throughout the history of the United States (Deschenes et al., 2001). Some solutions include not addressing the problem, institutionalization, self-contained classrooms, and mainstream and inclusion models.

Schools of today are encouraged to be more "inclusive" thanks to the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which demands least restrictive educational placements for students and has led to the inclusion of students in the United States (Bays & Crockett, 2007; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). The civil rights requirements make it a necessity for schools and principals to ensure success for all students academically (Billingsley et al., 2018; Sumbera et al., 2014). Schools have to find ways to meet the varied needs of students who in the past

were blamed, ignored, or separated from other students. The principal has the grave task of preparing the school and the staff for inclusion and for providing the backing, in both resources and commitment, to make it succeed (Bateman, 2002; Billingsley et al., 2018). There is no one-size-fits-all packaged program that instructs principals how to achieve true inclusion because the particular learning needs of students within schools vary tremendously. However, some caring administrators have found ways to achieve the goal of including all students in their school's learning culture while sharing their definition of inclusion focusing on all students' instructional needs, and communicating with teachers, parents, and the community. In effective schools, principals also disseminate a vision of inclusion and a call for a collective shared responsibility of including all students and for providing the grade-level content and high academic expectations for all students, including students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2018).

In this literature review, I examine definitions of inclusion and discuss the roles and characteristics of effective inclusive school leaders and how principal attitudes affect inclusion. I examine principal training and education related to inclusion. Additionally, I discuss leadership standards in general and standards that are particularly focused on leadership for inclusion and their intersection. Finally, I examine models for planning for inclusion and areas where additional research is needed surrounding inclusion.

### **Defining Inclusion**

Inclusion is a term without a precise definition and varied meanings due to the ambiguity of what inclusion means according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The fact the term inclusion is not specifically included in IDEA

further broadens the possible understanding of the term inclusion (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Despite this uncertainty, in this study I define inclusion as including students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, which consist of typically developing children who receive instruction based on the adopted standard course of study (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). This is the general definition shared by numerous researchers (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Bateman, 2002; Idol, 2006; Grove & Fisher, 1999; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). Specifically, for this research project, I align my understanding of inclusion or inclusive education with the definitions of Grove and Fisher (1999), McLaughlin and Ruedel (2012), and McLaughlin and Nolet (2004). These authors state that an inclusive model supports students with disabilities in their neighborhood school in the same classroom with their peers without disabilities. Students with disabilities are taught by a general education teacher, with additional support services provided in the classroom by special educators or resource teachers.

My professional and personal experiences, as well as existing research, led me to the following understanding. If students receive at least 80% of their education within a regular classroom, that constitutes inclusion. McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) agree that this is an acceptable inclusion percentage. The population of students with Individual Education Plans (IEPs) who spent at least 80% of their academic time with peers in regular education classrooms has increased due to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). This time percentage allows students to receive unique instruction based on their particular

needs within a pullout or resource classroom. Brooke, my daughter, is included in general education according to my definition of inclusion, which relies on the definitions of the researchers mentioned directly above. Brooke receives instruction within her general education classroom but is pulled out briefly three times a week to work on the production of targeted sounds that she cannot hear. As such, it is imperative that she is in a quiet space away from the noises of a typical elementary classroom. In this way, education for inclusion ensures that barriers are removed, so Brooke and students like her receive what they need in order to participate more fully in general education (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014).

This study focused on elementary school principals and their ability to include students who do not fit into traditional educational structures of the past and often today, and more particularly, students who are classified as having a disability under IDEA. The level of inclusive services varies from student to student based on individual needs that have been revealed throughout special education research in the continuum of placement (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Some students receive instruction for core academic subjects such as math in small pullout groups within a resource room. In this model, students are then returned to their regular education classroom for lunch, recess, and special non-curricular or encore classes such as physical education, art, music, and instruction in other languages. This is more aligned with social inclusion rather than full inclusion. Another model of inclusion is total inclusion, where students with disabilities are educated within their regular classroom with the regular education teacher being responsible for instruction and necessary modifications. Another inclusion variation is

students with identified disabilities receiving instruction within a regular classroom with push-in or short pullout sessions by special education or resource teachers (Billingsley et al., 2018; Idol, 2006).

### **School Leaders and Inclusion**

School principals are the most critical factor in creating schools and classrooms that educate all students regardless of their academic or physical capacity (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Causton-Theoharis & Theoharis, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2019; Guzman, 1996). Principal leadership determines the success or failure of schools striving to provide more adequate services for students with special needs in inclusive school settings (Bonds & Lindsey, 1982; Boscardin et al., 2009). As such, the job of principals in inclusive settings is even more difficult because the needs of general education students are coupled with those of students who have special needs and schools of today are under more public scrutiny than ever before to meet the needs of student groups (McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004 ). Although many administrators are not formally trained or prepared for such tasks, in the wake of legislation and school reform, they must shoulder this obligation to ensure that students' academic needs are met and that the overall program is effective (Frost & Kersten, 2011; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Today's school principal must be a leader who advocates for as well as promotes the success of all students, expressly those with disabilities. This can be achieved by facilitating the development and implementation of an inclusive definition of learning that is shared and supported by the school community (Billingsley et al., 2018; Crockett, 2007; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004). Principals are subject to a wide variety of pressures

from various interest groups with differing goals and intentions. These pressures impact decision-making, often causing principals not to consider each alternative's effect on students (Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; Crockett, 2007). Unfortunately, there are no definitive answers or steps to successfully leading inclusive schools. Through research, many desirable characteristics, roles, and standards for competent or effective inclusive and special education administrators have been derived (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; Frost & Kersten, 2011). In the sections that follow, I discuss the roles, characteristics, and attitudes of inclusive principals. Additionally, I examine ways principals can plan for inclusion within schools; finally, I discuss what research is still needed surrounding inclusive schools.

### **Roles of Inclusive Principals**

The job of the principal is multifaceted, which adds to the list of roles and responsibilities required. The job of inclusive administrators entails even more. According to Frost and Kersten (2011), the primary role of the principal is to provide instructional leadership within the school so that all students receive an appropriate education. Throughout the literature, instructional leadership has been discussed as being pivotal in the role of special and general education principals (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Crockett, 2002). In order to be an instructional leader, principals have to attend to many other facets of school leadership found throughout the literature. One facet or responsibility is setting the stage or atmosphere of inclusion within the school community. This entails modeling and aiding in the creation of a vision and a mission of inclusion which protects the rights and meets the educational needs of all students,



especially those with disabilities (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Bays & Crockett, 2007; National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2012). School principals who value inclusion are also responsible for ensuring the delivery of special education services and resources by leading, administering, supervising, and managing the provision of special education programs and services at the school level (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

In order to support the vision of inclusion, another role of the school level principal is to modify and refine school and special education policies, procedures, and schedules to support inclusive education (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Guzman, 1996). Supporting staff members in their inclusive efforts is also part of instructional leadership. This requires attending to the professional development and resource needs of staff members as well as allowing space for innovation to meet the needs of students. Providing instructional leadership for the specific needs of students with exceptionalities adds additional responsibilities for administrators such as being knowledgeable and helping to educate staff members about the laws, policies, research, and best practices for students is paramount. This includes attending IEP meetings, ensuring the current modifications are being given in inclusive classrooms (i.e., effective programming), ensuring and attending to the exceptional children's required paper paperwork, and certifying equity under law (Crockett, 2002; Garrison-Wade, 2005; Guzman, 1996; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004; Schulze & Boscardin, 2018).

Communication with parents and families is also imperative in instructional leadership. Parents have opinions and educational insight into the education of their students, as well

as appropriate ways to include students in the regular education classroom. This requires finesse on the part of the principal in order to build and sustain a rapport with parents of students with disabilities and all parents.

In summary, principal leadership for inclusion includes pursuing, cultivating, supporting, and monitoring the communication of staff, students, families, and all other educational stakeholders in the area of inclusive instruction (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Spillane & Lee, 2014). However, this list of instructional leadership roles and responsibilities of administrators is not exhaustive, and there is more research needed to define and refine the roles and responsibilities of an effective administrator who values inclusion. If an instructional leader is effective, educational outcomes for students who have unique educational needs should improve and enhance the success of their schools in meeting annual targets for improvement (Bays & Crockett, 2007; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004).

### **Characteristics of Effective School Leaders for Inclusion**

Competent inclusive leaders are those principals who do an adequate job with the mundane tasks of schools such as scheduling, completing reports and evaluations within the allotted time, and carrying out required monthly drills. In other words, the literature states that competent leaders attend to technical matters within schools that are more aligned to managerial leadership. Competence refers to the technical functions of schools and schooling in the areas of planning, organizing, and coordination of school activities. School principals exhibit a competent leadership level when they are performing up to set standards and student academic achievement meets set criteria (Burrello & Zadnik, 1986;

Guzman, 1996). The goal for school leaders, however, should move beyond mere competence to effectiveness (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007).

Effective inclusive leaders complete all managerial tasks at or above standard and attend to the souls (driving force) of schools through the sharing of a vision. Effective leaders for inclusion can articulate a vision for inclusion and can help others understand why inclusion is valued/needed/necessary. This means moving beyond the cliché vision and mission statements included in staff handbooks and on school websites. Gaining buy-in for the inclusive vision requires skill offered by an effective school leader. This buy-in may take time and can be gained using a variety of methods such the administer making inclusion required or by leading the staff through a process to discover the value of inclusion for all (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Effective principals who lead for inclusion also value staying up to date with the latest educational research in order to keep abreast of best practices, school law, and current legislation (Burrello & Zadnik, 1986; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). They then share this knowledge base with the staff and other school stakeholders in order to impact the total inclusive school program. Professional development is crucial in the successful implementation of inclusion. As such, effective school leaders are principals attended to their own professional development needs as discussed earlier and those of the teachers and staff. This means effective inclusive leaders show their commitment to inclusion by participating and learning alongside staff (Billingsley et al., 2018).

Effective administrators also understand and value the role of communication and relationships within an educational setting and attend to the racial and cultural needs of the school community (Boscardin et al., 2009; Guzman, 1996). Effective inclusive administrators develop a working knowledge about students' disabilities and associated learning and behavioral needs specific to students enrolled in the school community as a way to establish an inclusive school climate where all students matter (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

### **Principal Attitudes about Inclusion**

Principals' attitudes toward special education, more specifically, inclusion, have important influences on programming within schools (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). Principal beliefs about inclusion guide their actions. The principal is tasked with fostering the overall school climate, guiding instructional practices, helping to determine student placements, overseeing scheduling, and in general, the overall success of the school (Billingsley et al., 2018). Positive attitudes of principals towards inclusion can lead to increased or more favorable opportunities for students to be adequately served in a regular education classroom with other students with a range of academic abilities. Principals with this outlook understand the value of diversity within an academic setting, and they work to meet the needs of all students. These principals lead their schools with the belief of embracing students with disabilities in an inclusive setting (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Goor et al., 1997). Likewise, negative attitudes towards inclusion can hinder or limit the opportunities for students with exceptionalities to be educated alongside their peers in regular education classrooms (Garrison-Wade, 2005). Some principals with this

attitude may consider students with special needs as hindrances to the school and to other students due to the time commitment required to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities.

However, principals' negative feelings about special education and inclusion can be altered with the use of the inclusive paradigm (Goor et al., 1997). This inclusive paradigm requires principals to truly believe and live some of the cliché sayings often included in school missions and beliefs statements. The first belief in the inclusive paradigm is 'all children can learn.' This belief for effective principals does not suggest that all children learn in the same way and at the same rate. Instead, it purports that with the correct instructional strategies and supports, all students can learn and grow at their own pace (Goor et al., 1997). The second necessary belief in the inclusive paradigm is 'all children are part of their school community.' This means that regardless of students' academic abilities, they have a voice in and add value to the overall school community through their purposeful inclusion. The third inclusive paradigm thought is 'teachers can teach a wide range of students.' Effective principals who have an inclusive paradigm should empower teachers to meet the needs of students by providing training on innovative instructional strategies and methods (Goor et al., 1997). Fourth, the principals in the inclusive paradigm believe that 'teachers are responsible for all students' learning.' This prevents the regular classroom teachers from assigning the responsibility of all IDEA-protected students to the resource or special education teacher. Instead, it places the instructional responsibility on the classroom teacher to provide appropriate instruction. The last essential belief is that 'principals are responsible for the education of

all children in their building' (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Goor et al., 1997). This belief is paramount due to the mandates of NCLB. Not only are principals responsible for the day-to-day interactions of students, but for true academic growth for all students in their charge. Once principals embrace the five beliefs of the inclusive paradigm, they can start the heavy lifting required to embrace all students in an inclusive school community through beliefs, words, and finally, through actions.

### **Training and Preparation for Inclusion**

Dorothy Garrison-Wade (2005) conducted a literature review regarding principals' training or principals' lack of training in special education. This literature review provided valuable information about principals' perceptions of their special education knowledge and their training in the area of special education. Despite the increased needs ushered in by IDEA and NCLB, many principals have received limited if any training related to special education. This lack of training is challenging their ability to serve all students within their school community (Billingsley et al., 2018; Goor et al., 1997). This limited training also exacerbates the negative attitudes some principals have about inclusion and ultimately hinders leadership for inclusion within schools. The literature review also suggests that principals continue to rely on the district or central office to act as the primary source of information related to policies and laws surrounding special education. This situation is due to the lack of training in education law and policy, and it also leads to mere compliance instead of embracing the learning of all students (Sumera et al., 2014; Wakeman, Wakeman, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006). Not all colleges or universities require coursework in special education for school

administrators' certifications, endorsements, or degrees. This causes principals not to be knowledgeable about how to lead inclusive schools while meeting federal and state guidelines. This lack of appropriate training for principals has been discussed for more than 25 years, but sadly few colleges or universities offer courses focused on special education or inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2018).

### **Leadership Standards and Planning Strategies for Inclusion**

Standards for school leadership are abundant in educational discourse for general education, which has led to the creation of separate standards in special education leadership. "We acknowledge that special education leadership is still in its infancy relative to other more established areas of educational leadership; however, the field benefits from its close ties to these more established areas that contribute to the legitimacy of the practices of the discipline" (Boscardin et al., 2009, p. 76). However, inclusive education requires the incorporation of both special education leadership knowledge as well as general educational leadership knowledge; in short inclusive leadership is at the juncture of both special and regular administration (Boscardin et al., 2009; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

In the following section, I discuss some general and inclusive leadership standards, as well as how they intersect to provide guidelines for principals. Additionally, I present two models for planning for inclusive schools.

### **General Education and Inclusive Leadership Standards**

**Leadership standards for general education.** The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) developed integrated standards for educational leaders

and a professional development process with a call for the use of research-based practices. These standards and processes will help prepare aspiring principals for the multifaceted and diverse role of principal (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The ISLLC standards offer a leadership framework to be used with all students. As with many other standards, ISLLC standards continue to be updated to include relevant information to better prepare school administrators based on research findings and knowledge gained from the field. Though the ideals of the ISLLC standards remain consistently focused on improving educational leadership, the title changed to *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*, and the emphasis has changed to be one centered on students with a future-oriented perspective (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). As such, three additional standards have been added since 2009. Within every standard, leaders must reflect on how a particular task or communication will help all students to learn and excel. Attention to social justice, equity, and cultural responsiveness have been emphasized as leadership avenues to impact student learning, and the standards serve as a guide or a compass for school-level administrators (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).

The goal of the PSEL standards is to encourage academic success and wellbeing for all students. Does this also include students who have specific educational needs documented on an IEP? In order to answer this question, I looked closely at each of the ten standards to see just what is included regarding how to lead for inclusion:

- *Standard 1* describes the importance of being a flourishing school culture through the development of a mission, a vision, and core values with the



student serving as the driving forces. Letter C under Standard 1 specifically mentions inclusiveness as a desired core value (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). However, the term as used in this instance encompasses more than just students identified by IDEA as having disabilities. Instead, it speaks of equity and social justice for all. This is a desirable outcome, but specific steps to achieve inclusiveness are not present.

- *Standard 2* has a focus on ethical leadership as a way to promote student wellbeing and academic success. This impacts how IDEA-identified students should be considered in school-wide decisions.
- *Standard 3* offers great promise with its focus on equity and cultural responsiveness for all students. This standard even provides a non-exhaustive list of often-marginalized groups in letter E, which leaders must help provide a counter-narrative against institutional biases. The terms disability and special status are housed in this list, and combatting low expectations is made the charge of the school leader (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015).
- The focus of *Standard 4* is curriculum, instruction, and assessment for all students. Again this “all” includes students with exceptionality. However, specific instructions or considerations for students who have specific needs, as written in IEPs, are not mentioned.
- *Standard 5* discusses how the educational leader must nurture an inclusive community of care for students. This standard shares some of the same

underlying premises of the Circle of Care model of inclusion, which involves communication across the school community about students' needs and addresses all aspects of learning (Pickard, 2009; Wilson, 2006). This model is more often used in the healthcare or mental health field. However, it can serve as a guide as schools bridge gaps in communication with home, school, and the community to better meet the needs of all students.

- *Standard 6* is about recruitment and professional learning and growth for staff. This is not directly related to leadership for inclusion, but it can have an effect on how students who have special needs are instructed. This is an area of concern for practicing teachers and principals alike (Bateman, 2002; McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012).
- Creating and maintaining a functional Professional Learning Community is the focus of *Standard 7*. This has grave implications for special education teachers and regular education teachers working collaboratively to meet the needs of students who have IDEA-identified needs. The school principal has the task of creating the culture and schedule conducive to this type of critical planning (Billingsley et al., 2018).
- *Standard 8* emphasizes the importance of meaningfully involving families and the greater community in student learning. This again has some of the same underpinnings of the Circle of Care and providing communication and wraparound learning for all students and accepting input from families, the first educators for students.

- *Standard 9* addresses the traditional managerial duties of school administrators, such as fiscal and operational needs. However, this standard is also tied to student academic needs.
- Lastly, *Standard 10* deals with the monumental task of continual school improvement. This improvement is tied to meeting the needs of all students as monitored by NCLB mandates with a special interest in identified subgroups.

*The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015) offer great insight for practicing school leaders. They attempt to include all students, especially those who have been traditionally forgotten or marginalized, such as students who have documented educational needs. However, there are special considerations germane to IDEA mandates and legislation which are not specifically addressed. Do leaders for inclusion need to follow just the above standards, or should instructional leadership expectations differ within an inclusive school setting that embraces the needs of all students, even those with learning exceptionalities? This is a multi-dimensional question with answers that lie in the experiences of practicing school administrators.

**Standards for administrators of special education.** As discussed in Chapter I, six standards were created specifically for administrators of special education (Standard 1: Leadership and Policy, Standard 2: Program Development and Organization, Standard 3: Research and Inquiry, Standard 4: Evaluation, Standard 5: Professional Development and Ethical Practice, and Standard 6: Collaboration) that give special attention to what is required to meet the needs of students protected under IDEA. The Professional Standards

for Administrators of Special Education were developed by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) in conjunction with other agencies (Boscardin et al., 2009).

These standards serve as an outline for administrators and call special attention to the policies and laws required to meet the needs of students who receive special education services. Additionally, the standards emphasize the need for administrators and schools to stay abreast of the latest research in order to meet the needs of all students effectively. The focus on research necessitates the need for continued professional development offerings in order to put research-based strategies into practice. Collaboration is also highlighted as a standard for administrators. Collaboration refers to the administrator working with all stakeholders involved in the education of the students, including but not limited to the following: general education teachers, special education teachers, teachers of related special education services, families, and outside agencies (DeMatthews et al., 2019). The Professional Standards for Administrators of Special Education can serve as guidelines that can be used to help in the development of a vision, to develop policy, and to provide guideposts for schools, school districts, and universities as they strive to create inclusive schools (Boscardin et al., 2009).

**Intersection.** The ISLLC Standards and the Professional Administrative Standards for Special Education intersect (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003), and both standards now connect to *The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*. However, neither provide specific expectations or criteria for fostering effective inclusive leadership. In response to this shortcoming, the Council of Chief State School Officers

(CCSSO) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform (CEEDAR) created a document which connects the beforementioned PSEL standards with research for effective inclusive schools to create a guiding document (Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2019). This guiding document provides timely information for principals and their leadership role in leading inclusive schools, which was implied but not explicitly included in PSEL standards, as evident from my earlier discussion. Unlike in the past, the guiding document pushes principals from mere compliance with IDEA mandates to developing a working knowledge of IDEA and the disabilities, included allowing principals to possess the skills to truly monitor instructional progress (Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2019). Table 1 briefly shows the guidelines as they relate to the PSEL Standards (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Billingsley et al., 2018).

Table 1

## Guiding Document

<b>PSEL Standard</b>	<b>Understandings from CCSSO/CEEDAT Guidance Document</b>
Mission, Vision, and Core values	The vision and mission should be developed collaboratively with leadership from the principal. This mission and vision should support success for all students, including students with disabilities.
Ethics and professional norms	Principals must acknowledge inequities while also promoting equity. Principals should be ethically minded as they attend to daily situations that arise surrounding meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This should be done with positive relationships built on effective communication and trust.

Table 1

Cont.

PSEL Standard	Understandings from CCSSO/CEEDAT Guidance Document
Equity and cultural responsiveness	Principals ensure that all students experience academic success, including students with disabilities. This should be achieved by equitable access to support, appropriate resources, and learning opportunities. Principals educate others on historical forces and institutional forces that hinder equitable access and opportunities for students who have disabilities. Principals will also focus on asset-based thinking instead of deficit-based thinking in their leadership.
Curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Principals ensure high academic expectations for all students, including students with disabilities. The principal works with teachers and support staff to plan and deliver differentiated tiered instruction while using assessments to guide instructional focuses.
Communities of student care and support	Principals foster and maintain a healthy, safe, and caring school atmosphere that meets the needs of all students. Principals support teachers in the formation of inclusive classroom environments that foster/encourage positive teacher-to-student relationships and peer-to-peer relationships.
Professional capacity for school personnel	Recruiting, hiring, and retaining general and special education teachers who share the inclusive school-wide vision and embrace improving achievement and outcomes for all students, especially students with disabilities. The principal should also provide high quality, timely, and relevant professional development offerings and participate alongside teachers. The principal should promote and practice self-reflection and use strategies to motivate and recognize staff.

Table 1

Cont.

<b>PSEL Standard</b>	<b>Understandings from CCSSO/CEEDAT Guidance Document</b>
Professional community for teachers and staff	Principals model high-expectations and encourage teachers to set high expectations for students and themselves. Principals encourage self-reflection and assessment to build accountability. Principals provide feedback and model how to openly receive and use feedback for improvement. Collaboration is the expectation to live the mission and vision of meeting the needs of all students.
Meaningful engagement of families and community	The principal leads in the creation of meaningful partnerships with the families of students with disabilities in order to support students in the school and the community. The goal of the partnerships is to gain insight into the children and their disabilities and specific learning needs in order to make informed instructional and educational decisions.
Operations and management	The principal manages and uses the budgets allotted by the state and district to effectively support the school's mission and vision of meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The principal assigns roles and responsibilities purposefully within the school to maximize support for students with disabilities.
School Improvement	Principals ensure the needs of students are specifically addressed within the school's plan for improvement. Principals should focus on why there is a need for improvement and how improvement will take place within the school to meet the total educational needs of all students.

### **Principals Planning for Inclusion**

As with any educational initiative, there needs to be an intentional plan for including all students within regular education classrooms and schools. This inclusive

plan cannot be haphazard and should include all educational stakeholders in the process. Scholars reiterate the need for teachers, parents, and administrators to be involved as students with disabilities enter regular classrooms to learn side by side with their typically performing peers (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Guzman, 1996). This planning can start at the district level, but the principal must complete the planning work at the school level (Crockett, 2002). How does this planning actually happen? Crockett presents a framework including five principles for responsive and inclusive school leaders. The core principles are ethical practice, individual consideration, equity under the law, effective programming, and establishing productive partnerships. The core principles mirror the previously mentioned responsibilities of instructional leadership for inclusion.

The Star Model is a tool for special education planning which uses the five core principles as the guideposts for planning (see Figure 1). Each core principle represents a point on the Star Model for administrators to reference and to derive meaningful questions as they plan inclusive settings for students. The core principles can be used interactively in the planning process because each core principle intersects.

The IRIS Center also offers a module for principals seeking to create inclusive schools entitled *Creating an Inclusive School Environment: A Model for School Leaders* (Billingsley et al., 2018). In this module, principals work through the following stages: Challenge, Initial Thoughts, Perspectives and Resources, Wrap up, and Assessment (The IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University Nashville, 2020). During the module, principals explore their personal thoughts about inclusion and then are provided with information about the definition of inclusion from experts in the field. They also



explore how inclusion differs from traditional instruction and why inclusion is so urgently needed in today's schools. Next, principals learn about change and how to work through change within their school, including how to improve and expand once the inclusive changes have been implemented. Finally, the module links the principals to numerous resources that they can use or refer to as they seek to create inclusive school environments (The IRIS Center Peabody College Vanderbilt University Nashville, 2020). This module serves as a resource for principals who desire to lead inclusive schools. However, it does not represent all that is needed to create an inclusive learning environment.

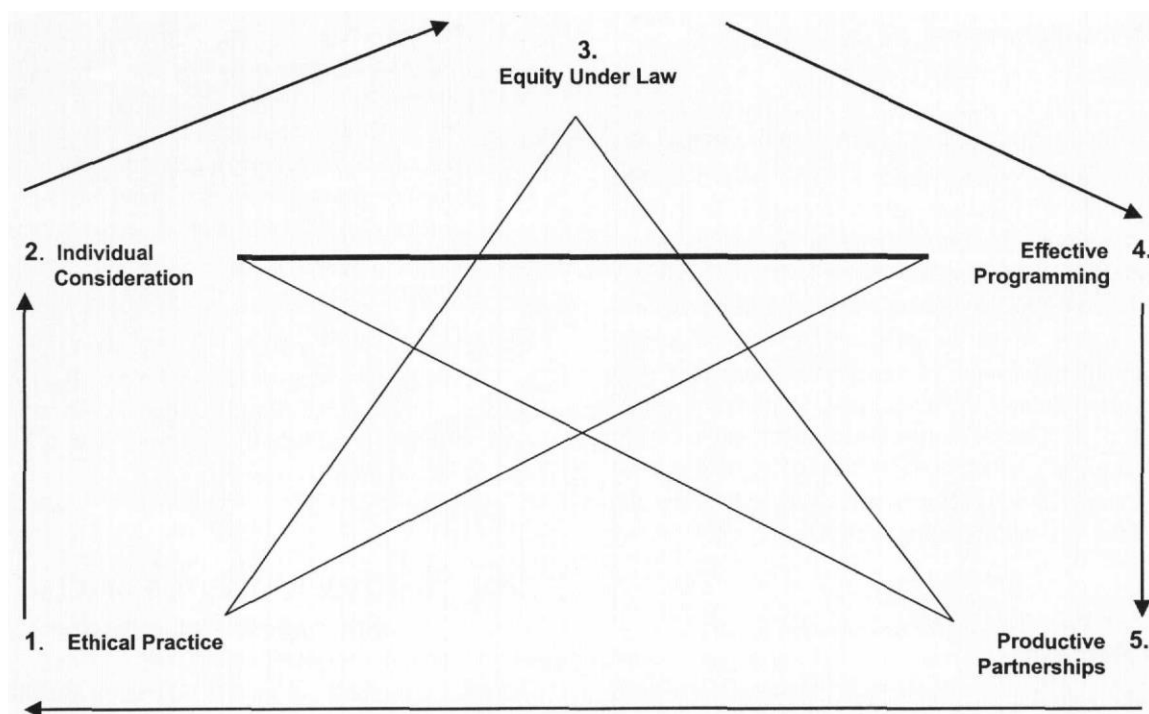


Figure 1. A Star Organizer Including the Core Principles Used in Special Education Planning from the Star Model. Reproduced from Crockett, J. B. (2002, May/June). *Special Education's Role in Preparing Responsive Leaders for Inclusive Schools. Remedial and Special Education*, 23(3), 157–168.

### **Research Still Needed**

As the previous sections of this literature review indicate, inclusion and leadership for inclusion have both been researched from various vantage points. However, there is still much more to be done to develop an understanding of school leadership for inclusion. Throughout the literature, the importance of instructional leadership for inclusive schools was confirmed. The research, however, lacks information, descriptions, and theoretical explanations regarding how leadership for inclusive education truly occurs within schools and a precise definition of what it looks like in practice (Bays & Crockett, 2007). This knowledge and understanding are important as we strive to create and nurture inclusive school environments that meet and support the learning needs of all students (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007). Additionally, inclusive education requires planning in order for it to meet the varied needs of all students. Previous research has found that planning for inclusive education is an area for continued research if we are to help practicing principals usher in inclusion (Crockett, 2002; Frost & Kersten, 2011). The attitudes and beliefs of principals about inclusion are a motivating factor in the creation and implementation of an inclusive school program (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007). Since a principal's personal definitions of inclusion are key to understanding and defining leadership for inclusion, I made these areas the focus of my dissertation research.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I shared what the literature has to offer on the roles of principals in inclusion, leadership standards and how they relate to inclusion, principal perceptions and

understanding of inclusion, and the definition of inclusion. Additionally, I discussed how school leaders could plan for effective inclusion.

Chapter III will provide an explanation of the research method I used in this study. The data collection process and the data analysis process for this study are also discussed. In Chapter IV, I reveal findings from the data, and finally, in Chapter V, I analyze my findings and discuss implications for school districts, administrators, parents, and researchers.

### **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

My professional experiences as an educator and my personal experiences with my daughter Brooke led to the following research questions about how principals lead and how schools embrace or include students who are considered outside of the norm due to risk factors. Specifically, in this study, I investigated the following research questions:

1. How do principals define and understand inclusion?
2. How do principals actualize or live their definition of inclusion?
  - a. How does the context of high stakes testing affect their ability to live out their definition of inclusion?
  - b. How do principals align their personal definition of inclusion with district expectations?
  - c. How do principals share their definitions of inclusion with the staff and the community?

#### **Overview**

Studies have been conducted on leadership, inclusion, and free and appropriate public education (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Devecchi & Nevin, 2015; Guzman, 1996; Ingram, 1997; Sumbera et al., 2014). Researchers have employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to understand various components of leadership in inclusive settings. Invaluable information has been gained through both types of research and the

combination of both. However, there is a vast difference in the knowledge uncovered in qualitative and quantitative studies. Statistical and experimental data collected from quantitative research methods only reveal a portion of the story (Lichtman, 2013). Leadership dynamics within inclusive settings are multifaceted and require in-depth understandings, which can be gained through the use of qualitative research.

Qualitative research marks an alternative way of learning and knowing. Qualitative inquiry is a set of research methods used to obtain information data from smaller groups of respondents or participants through a variety of data collection techniques such as observations and in-depth interviews. Unlike traditional quantitative studies, the data is then inductively analyzed by coding in search of patterns and themes (Lichtman, 2013). Qualitative research proposes to understand the lived experiences of people and to interpret their social interactions (Waterhouse, 2007). The researchers in qualitative studies are responsible for gathering, organizing, and interpreting data or information. In qualitative studies, the researcher is the main research instrument (Waterhouse, 2007). Interpretations and understandings are based on the researchers' lenses, experiences, and backgrounds (Lichtman, 2013). Qualitative research does not follow a particular method or set of steps (Caelli, Lynne, & Mill, 2003). It is fluid, which means it continues to change. Data and findings within qualitative studies can be represented in a variety of ways, including but not limited to story-telling or narrative, drama, poetry, and even videos (Waterhouse, 2007).

## **Research Tradition**

My study did not subscribe to one particular qualitative research approach. Instead, I used qualitative methodologies to collect, organize, and analyze data through a generic approach (Lichtman, 2013). A generic approach, like other qualitative approaches, has a goal of unearthing meaning and understanding, which was the goal in this study. This generic or pragmatic approach situates the researcher as the data collector and analyzer, so in this study I collected and analyzed the data. The generic approach allows researchers to use some of the characteristics of other research approaches, which is the circumstance in my study.

My generic study took on some of the tenets of a case study. A case study is a research approach with a laser-like focus on an organization, task, or person (Lichtman, 2013). In this study, I looked closely at how elementary principals define inclusion but did not spend extensive time with participants as in traditional case studies. The case study is a way to understand real-life situations and experiences in context, and case studies also provide a way to view practices as they unfold (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The observations in this study allowed me to view elementary principals using their inclusive definition in real-time. This study focused on the position of the elementary school principal, and the object of research was the definition of inclusion and the lived reality of leadership for inclusion.

In order to gain further insight, I conducted in-depth interviews with seven building principals from different schools and one district administrator, similar to the multiple case study format. A multiple case study allows the researcher to discover

differences within and between cases (Baxter, 2008). Multiple case studies can be found throughout educational research. For example, Jacobson (2007) used a multiple case study method to study the leadership in three high-poverty elementary schools that experienced improved student achievement during the principals' tenure. This method allowed me to triangulate data and provide thick, rich descriptions about how leadership, practice, and policy led to an increase in student performance (Jacobson, 2007). Likewise, in this study, I sought a clearer understanding of how the selected participants define and understand inclusion within an elementary school setting, what factors affect their definition, and how they share or disseminate this definition to the staff and community stakeholders. As such, my study was focused on the information-oriented selection process (Flyvbjerg, 2006). In this process, participants were chosen or selected based on expectations the researcher has about their information content.

### **Participants**

In order to truly unearth the experiences and thoughts of principals and how they define inclusion, I identified seven principals who were currently serving in elementary schools and one exceptional children's administrator in the southeastern section of the United States to serve as the primary study participants. The principal participants represented seven different elementary schools within one school district with a diverse representation of schools ranging from rural to suburban to the inner city. The county-based district was selected based on its location, which allowed for ease of access for data collection.

I identified the primary study participants using the following avenues. I sent out a solicitation email (see Appendix A) using the school district's elementary principal and district leaders' listservs. The email included the subject, the explanation of the study, the participant criteria, contact information, and IRB and district approval. Additionally, I emailed and mailed a research participation flyer (see Appendix B) to elementary school principals within the selected district using school email and mailing addresses. I also placed the flyer on the information boards at district meeting locations frequented by principals and other school leaders. Additionally, I made telephone calls using the approved telephone recruitment script (see Appendix C). Willing participants contacted me by email or telephone using the information included on the approved correspondences. Once three participants were located, a snowballing method was used to find other participants to ensure the desired number of participants for the study was achieved. Snowballing is a way to increase study sampling by asking a current participant to recommend others for participation (Lichtman, 2013). In this study, confirmed participants provided potential participants with the scripted email or the research flyer. Interested potential participants made contact using the information included on the previously mentioned correspondences. In this way, the private contact information of individuals was safeguarded.

Once I identified eight study participants, each one was given an opportunity to formally participate in the generic study and sign an informed consent before the interviews, observations, or any other form of data collection. I reassured participants of



their option to discontinue participation in the study at any time and of their right to ask clarifying questions throughout the process.

### **Setting of Research**

There was not a designated location for the study's interviews. Instead, I allowed study participants to select the location for the interviews as long as the following location specifications were met: a private, quiet location to ensure participant comfort and to maximize researcher understanding. All participants chose to meet in schools for the interviews both during and after school hours. Observations and second interviews also took place at the various schools of the participants.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative studies offer many avenues for data collection. As such, researchers must be clear about what exactly they wish to learn in order to select the data sources that are most appropriate. However, it is essential to be open to address or analyze unexpected data which offers insight into improved understanding of the case. Qualitative researchers often employ a combination of methods in order to achieve triangulation—an approach which some researchers view as a means for widening the array of data that may be interpreted and increasing the trustworthiness and usefulness of their findings (Lichtman, 2013). As such, in this study, the following data collection sources were employed: in-depth semi-structured interviews, targeted observations, and follow-up interviews that included participants responding to scenarios.

## **Interviews**

Interviews are widely used in qualitative research in the data collection phase. They allow the researcher to inquire openly about the meanings, motivations, and actions of the participants (Flick, Kardorff, & Steinke, 2004). The purpose of interviews in this study was to learn more about how selected participants define and understand inclusion within an elementary school setting, how they bring their definition to life, how they manage their definition while being cognizant of the school district's definition, and how they share or disseminate this definition. In order to achieve this goal, I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions in order to allow participants to share their thoughts more freely. This allowed me to ask related clarifying questions about participant responses if needed (Groenewald, 2004). However, semi-structured interviews provided the structure necessary to analyze across the participants and ensure that essential questions were posed to all research participants. The interview subjects were one district leader in special education and elementary school principals. Initial interviews ranged between 40 and 60 minutes and were held at an agreed-upon time and location. The variation in interview times was due to the length of participant responses and the number of clarifying and follow-up questions that I asked. I selected two principals for follow-up interviews based on the examination of the data collected during the initial interview and continued interest from the participants. My follow-up interviews with principal participants lasted 30 to 45 minutes and included responses to two scenarios regarding inclusion in elementary school settings. I created the scenarios (see

Appendix D) based on consideration of the inclusion research and my professional experiences as an educator.

Interviews were one-on-one and face-to-face. I recorded each interview session using two electronic devices for clarity for transcription. Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist to aid in data analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants before transcription to aid in confidentiality and allow the use of direct quotes while maintaining confidentiality.

In order to set an appropriate stage for each interview, I dressed in professional attire during the interviews with all participants due to the professional nature of the participants' positions. Additionally, I established rapport by talking about generalities related to the participants, such as the weather or traffic before starting the formal interview (Lichtman, 2013). Information about the researcher was shared at the onset of all interviews such as the reason for interviewing, the purpose of the study, how the information would be used, and the approximate length of the interview (Lichtman, 2013). Participants signed written consent forms at that time. Once the consents were signed, I began the audio recordings, and the formal portion of the interviews commenced with the use of two electronic devices.

I worded the questions for my semi-structured interview protocols (in Appendixes D, E, and F) for particular study participants. I also asked follow-up or clarifying questions based on participant responses. Consequently, the questions for the principal participants differed from those of the district administrator.

## **Observations**

Observing individuals in their everyday life or setting assists with understanding interactions, relationships, and the overall complexity of human behavior (Lichtman, 2013). As such, observations serve as a powerful piece for data triangulation. The school sites of two participants served as observation settings for my research, and the principals were the focus of observations in a shadowing model. I selected the participants and their school sites based on a review of data from the interviews and participant interest in inclusion. The two principals were able to clearly share their definition of inclusion and how they live this definition daily. The shadowing took place after the initial semi-structured interviews and lasted four hours with Mary and an entire school day with Helen. The shadowing day was jointly selected by the participants with my input with the goal of witnessing the principals' conversations or interactions with staff members and parents during formal meetings such as staff meetings, Professional Learning Community meetings, and normal daily interactions. In order to add insight into the administrator's working definition of inclusion and how it is disseminated to stakeholders, I devoted special attention to interactions revolving around educational decisions dealing with policies, laws, special education scheduling, and data with a focus on the exceptional children subgroups. Data during observations were gathered by hand using an observation form located in Appendix G. Observation data were transferred into narrative form directly following observations to ensure clarity of data. Observation data were further coded and disaggregated during the data analysis process.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Interviews**

I recorded all interviews using two electronic devices. The interviews were professionally transcribed. I checked them for accuracy before the beginning of formal analysis by carefully listening to recorded interviews multiple times while checking against what had already been transcribed. This allowed minor errors to be corrected to ensure accuracy. I compiled an a priori list of codes based on the literature and research questions before the start of official coding (Lichtman, 2013). Initial coding was completed in Microsoft Word using the review function and assigned code abbreviations. I analyzed transcripts carefully, and I assigned appropriate codes to portions of the interview transcript, which illustrated or provided an example of the selected code. I highlighted quotes or phrases related to specific codes and the code abbreviation, and I included a comment in the comment box using the review feature in Word. I also created memos using the review and comment feature, capturing detailed thoughts related to codes. All data were collected prior to the analysis. I analyzed transcribed interviews and observation narratives individually (Merriam, 2009). I read and reread each data entry several times. I composed memos throughout the process in order to capture my reflections, tentative themes, hunches, ideas, and things to pursue in future data collection (Merriam, 2009). During the coding process, additional codes emerged and were added to the code list and assigned an abbreviation (see Appendix G) (Lichtman, 2013). “One danger associated with the analysis phase is that each data source would be treated independently and the findings reported separately” (Baxter, 2008, p. 555).

Consequently, I compared findings between and among data sources looking for reoccurring themes and creating tentative categories.

These comparisons continued until all data were analyzed and coded. However, this process did not yield the desired information. A data analysis coding template was used to capture participant information, organize raw data such as quotes under each research question, and to analyze and interpret data. Previously coded interviews were used to complete the template, and assigned codes were included on the template. This yielded possible themes for each research question (see Appendix H). I identified four themes by carefully analyzing the raw data and initial themes identified across the four coding templates for the two research questions and the secondary or sub-questions. In my findings chapter, I discuss each theme identified during the analysis by using thick, rich descriptions and specific quotes.

### **Subjectivity**

As the mother of a daughter who has an IEP and is included in a regular education setting, I realized that I have some biases based on my own lived experiences and position. As a result, I openly included a synopsis of my experiences for the reader in the problem statement section in my first chapter. Additionally, I shared information with the research participants at the onsite of each interview and ensured them how I would use their words and description to unearth findings in this study.

Other areas of subjectivity revolve around my position as a middle class professional African American educator who attends a university focused on social justice. I am conscious of the inequities often associated with marginalized populations.

Throughout the analysis process, I had to be mindful of my interpretation of the data by relying on quotes of the participants to safeguard the content of the study findings. Additionally, thick, rich descriptions provided by the study participants were used as an additional safeguard.

### **Trustworthiness**

In order to ensure trustworthiness in my study, I openly communicated about my personal connection to the world of special education and inclusion as a parent and educator with participants and with my study's readers. During the participant solicitation process, I was honest and transparent about the purpose of the study in order to allow participants to make informed decisions about participation. Additionally, I had a prolonged engagement with two research participants. Research participants were allowed to review the findings and to ask questions throughout this inquiry.

### **Benefits and Risks**

The potential benefits of this study are many for principals, school districts, researchers and parents. The research offers insight into leadership and meeting the needs of students identified with disabilities within this system of accountability. This research adds to the conversation about leadership practices and the understandings of how these practices intersect with IDEA mandates and state and district policies within public elementary schools as they attempt to provide the least restrictive environments. Additionally, this research offers practicing principals an opportunity to understand the thinking of others in the field as they make real-life decisions about how to best meet the needs of all students. Parents can also look at this research to hear what practicing

educators have to share about their experiences and the intersection of laws, policies, and the realities of special education, particularly inclusion. The themes that emerged can assist practicing principals with merging the worlds of regular education and special education into a more inclusive setting for all students.

The risks associated with this study were minimal. Participants simply shared information about their daily work experiences and personal thoughts. Pseudonyms were used to protect the privacy of all participants in case they felt some discomfort or risks with sharing about the district, state, or federal policies or laws that they felt may interfere, hinder, or complicate their daily work due to potential adverse professional or personal effects. Additionally, a pseudonym was used for school names and the district name.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to all studies. The small number of study participants could be considered a limitation. However, this was an initial study, and the findings and understandings gained are intended to inform additional, future research that involves additional participants and more data collection. The choice to select participants who live in the southeastern United States could also be seen as a limitation. However, the data collected in this study adds to growing research on the schools and inclusion.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I reviewed the research questions. I discussed the reason why I selected the qualitative approach in this study and shared how and why the generic approach was used. I also discussed the details of the participant selection process, the



research setting, and data collection in this chapter. Additionally, I outlined the data analysis process. In the next chapter, findings for the data are revealed using quotes. Finally, in Chapter V, research questions are answered using information from the study participants and conclusions for the study are discussed, as well as how participant responses and actions align with standards for special education administrators. Additionally, I also share suggestions and implications for school districts, administrators, parents, and researchers.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **FINDINGS**

In this chapter, I introduce the participants and share information about their professional history and, ultimately, their journey to their current position as an elementary school principal or beyond. I also report my findings from the participant interviews in the form of four main themes. I share observational data in detail from the two shadowing experiences and discuss the relationship of this data to the themes from the interviews. I conclude by sharing data from the participant responses to the two scenarios presented during a second interview.

#### **Participant Profiles**

##### **Mary Cary**

Mary Cary is in her fourth year as principal of Sunnyvale Elementary. Before becoming a principal, she worked at the central office level on the curriculum team focused on math. This team provided circular training and support to schools within the district. Mary had a desire to return to the school level and to be surrounded by students. Mary's educational career started as an elementary classroom teacher. Mary has a special interest in special education, and her dissertation centered around students whom she refers to as outliers. "My passion tends to lie for those kids who are outliers, which is really what I spoke to in my dissertation; it was really about making sure kids have equitable access in general education classrooms."

**Susan Combo**

Susan Combo started her career in education as a general education elementary school teacher. She taught in three different states, all on the eastern seaboard, including rural and metropolitan districts. She received a degree in school administration and became a building level administrator. After working as principal for some years, she moved to the central office as an administrator and served in various positions, many in support of principals. During this time, she earned her doctorate in education. She is currently in the final years of her career and is back at the school level as an elementary school principal. She plans to retire from this school-level position.

**Shawn Williams**

Shawn Williams has been employed in the same school district for twenty-six years. He started his career as an elementary school teacher. He moved quickly to the district level and focused his work on curriculum. He provided support to those at the building level with curriculum and the implementation of district-level initiatives. He went back to the school level and served as assistant principal for a few years before leading his own school. He is currently the principal of a Title I elementary school, and he has served in the same school for the last 13 years. Shawn shared his desire to remain at the school level but welcomed the chance to move to another school.

**John Curry**

John Curry is in his sixth year as principal of a Title I elementary school. This is his fourth elementary school principalship and his thirteenth year as an elementary level principal. Before the elementary principalship, Mr. Curry served as an assistant principal

for 5 years. He started his educational journey as a high school social studies teacher. He taught high school for one year and middle school for 12 years. Most of his educational experiences were spent in large urban districts, but he had one year in a small rural district in the southeastern portion of the United States and decided this setting was not for him. He is proud of the fact he has seen kids at all levels K-12. He has a doctorate degree in education, and his desire is to continue to grow in his educational career. A short-term goal is to become a middle or high school principal.

**Melinda Thomas**

Melinda Thomas started her career in education as a school counselor. She worked as a counselor for 5 years and then became an assistant principal. She worked in that role for two years before getting her first principalship at an impacted Title I elementary school. This principalship lasted for two years. She is currently in her eleventh year as principal of another elementary school and earned the prestigious title of 'Principal of the Year.' She focuses on school data and moving all kids. All of her experience has been in the same district.

**Dawn Palmer**

Dawn Palmer has been in education for 40 years. She started her career as a substitute teacher because she graduated from college a semester early in December. Her first fulltime teaching job was in special education what is now known as exceptional children. She worked with several different categories in special education before returning to school fulltime to receive a Master's in Emotional Disturbance. She worked for a few years more in her specialty area in the same metropolitan community as before.

She relocated to the rural southeast and worked in special education before becoming an assistant principal for a year and then principal of a failing school. The school became a national model school and she became ‘Principal of the Year’ for the region. She relocated and earned a doctorate in education and is now in her 13th year as principal. She also received ‘Principal of the Year’ honors at her current school.

**Lisa Moore**

Lisa Moore started her career as a resource teacher of the general curriculum in an elementary school. She then moved into district leadership for two years as a program administrator for special education due to her performance and compliance. She relocated to another district as a director of elementary schools and then returned to the previous district as director of special education and support, but she feels teaching is still her favorite job.

**Helen Bowman**

Helen Bowman started her teaching career as a second-grade teacher in a rural county. She transitioned to a lead literacy teacher position. While in this position, she earned her Master’s in School Administration and her National Boards Certification. She moved to a more metropolitan area as an assistant principal. She is now a principal of a Title I elementary school and has served in the same school for 12 years.

Table 2

## Participant Profiles

Participants	Years in Current Position	Years in District	Years in Education	Gender	Race
Mary	4	Entire Career	18	Female	W
Susan	1	10	30+	Female	B
Shawn	13	Entire Career	26	Male	W
John	6	6	18	Male	B
Melinda	11	Entire Career	20	Female	W
Dawn	13	13 Years	40	Female	B
Lisa (District Leader)	2	In and out for several years	17	Female	W
Helen	12	15	24	Female	W

**Setting: Arrowhead School District**

All participants in this study work in the same school district. The district is in the eastern part of the United States. It is a fairly large district consisting of a variation of schools such as high-performing, failing, choice schools, and traditional neighborhood schools. Some schools within the district are considered urban, while others are rural. The participants represent this variation in the schools they lead. Like many other districts, this district has seen success with lots of accolades and has also been the recipient of criticism for making unpopular decisions for students. ASD celebrates many successes, such as an increase in the graduation rate to 89.8% and for having the highest combined SAT scores among the surrounding districts during this study. However, ASD's data analysis identified disparities, disproportionalities, and gaps between students of color

and their White peers in all subjects and grades. These disparities were especially evident with students receiving special education services. The district has a focus on closing the gaps currently present and has rolled out a new long-term road map to ensure a quality education for all.

### **Interviews**

In this section, I report my findings from the participant interviews in the form of four main themes.

#### **Theme I—There is No Single Agreed-Upon Definition of Inclusion**

There is no one agreed-upon definition of inclusion among the participants in the study. However, all principals were able to verbalize their own individual understanding of inclusion and articulate their personal definitions of inclusions in some form. Some definitions were clear and precise, while others were more complex and woven into the fabric of an experience or current situation. Helen was able to share her thinking more compactly, as evidenced in the following quote: “Inclusion should be where students of all abilities are allowed to participate in a regular classroom setting with support.”

Helen’s understanding of inclusion centered on the regular education classroom as the home base for the learning for all students regardless of their ability. Helen did not share if she was referring to academic or physical ability. In her concise definition of inclusion, she also feels there should be a level of support in order for students of all ability levels to learn. She did not elaborate on her succinct definition of the types of support.

Susan was also able to share her inclusion definition compactly. However, she provided more information/elaboration than Helen.

Looking at the needs of our students with exceptional needs, based on their abilities and talents and strengths and needs, looking at the most appropriate environment for them to facilitate their learning and also to be in the most appropriate setting.

Susan's definition focused on students with exceptional needs and their abilities. She did not focus on one particular educational setting. Instead, she focused on learning environments on a case by case bases in order for students to be educated in an environment most conducive to their learning needs. She made no mention of additional support or a traditional or regular education classroom setting.

John Curry offered even more to consider in his definition of inclusion. He elaborated on some elements mentioned by Helen but also introduced new thinking in his definition.

It looks like it's a situation that typically is focused on EC, but it can also be ESL or other types of services when those services are actually pushed into the classroom and you have a true co-teaching model, so that kids that may have disabilities can still get core content, but they're supported from the classroom.

John broadened the scope when compared to Susan's definition by introducing other specific populations of students such as English Language Learners (ELL), but he still included the classroom setting as the site or location of inclusion. He added more information to the idea of support that Helen mentioned in her definition. His idea of support allows students that may have disabilities to have access to general education content while having the supports they need. He also referred to a co-teaching model within the regular education classroom. He did not specifically refer to a resource teacher or a teacher of the English Language Learner, so one must assume that whoever is



pushing into the classroom setting will co-teach. This co-teaching model allows more equitable access with the possibility of having two certified teachers in the room. John explained,

Inclusion is—I would view it on a spectrum of how students are served, students that are identified as exceptional education and their service and how that includes them with the general population of students. You can go anywhere from just students having an opportunity to have social time with their peers during recess, lunch, specials—those types of things, to an instructional inclusion model where the EC instruction is happening in tandem with the classroom instruction in the classroom and there's a partnership between the teacher and the EC teacher and those students have access to not only the general curriculum, but the support systems that they need in order to be more successful with that.

Shawn Williams referred to levels of inclusion for students to receive services within the general population. He mentioned a range starting with a more social setting, progressing to academic or instructional settings. The latter end of the spectrum would be the regular education classroom setting mentioned by both Helen and John. Shawn also referred to support for students with a general curriculum like Shawn, but instead of a co-teaching model, he referred to the teachers working in tandem; the general education teacher providing instruction to the class while the resource teacher provides instruction to included students on the same curriculum. He ended his definition by referencing successful learning for students who are included, which is related to the access mentioned in John's definition.

Like Shawn, Melinda Thomas situates her definition with a particular population of students who have special needs. She elaborates more on the co-teaching model mentioned by John. She assigns equal responsibility for planning, looking at data,

providing instruction, and creating tasks to the general education teacher and the resource teacher. In Melinda's definition, it is almost difficult to differentiate between the two previously mentioned teachers because they both provide whole and small group instruction for all students. What stands out in Melinda's definition of inclusion the most is the attention to data driving instruction for all students within a classroom.

I think when I think of the term inclusion for our special needs students, I think, about how both the core teacher or general ed curriculum teacher as well as the EC resource teacher and our EC specialists are working together as a team to plan lessons, to reflect on the student data, to organize individualized learning tasks with the students and then also some co-teaching as well within the classroom, so it may be, if it's during whole group instruction, one of either the core teacher or the EC teacher may take the lead of the whole group portion and then when they get into the guided and small group practice, both of the teachers are working within small groups, together. Also, every week they're looking at their student data together, looking at both the entire classroom, the regular and EC students in terms of how they're progressing—what their needs are, what their strengths are and then they're reflecting together about what needs to happen next to help them learn and grow.

The next definition comes from a slightly different lens. Unlike other participants, Lisa Moore works in district leadership in a department that specializes in students who have Individual Education Plans (IEP) and receive services to close gaps. Her definition is situated in a lived example. In her example, she discusses the physical layout or environment of a classroom setting. This is the first mention of meeting the physical needs of students within a regular education classroom. Lisa also included information about including students with disabilities into the classroom with their non-disabled peers. This idea has resurfaced throughout several definitions. Lisa did make a note of the need for academic and social inclusion for students. The idea of co-teaching was also

reintroduced but not elaborated upon. Lisa also introduced new thinking on inclusion. The definitions discussed so far have made no reference to training or equipping staff members with needed tools to teach the curriculum and to include all students. Lisa referred to including resource or EC staff members in curricular offers provided to regular education staff members, so they can better meet the needs of the students they serve. Lisa's definition deals with including students and staff members.

I define inclusion as practices that you look at, whether it's environmental—I'll give the perfect example that I always give is that I walked into a classroom one time where a student utilized a wheelchair for mobility and the environment that was set up in that classroom actually restricted the student from accessing a portion of the classroom because of the way the environment was set up—tables, desks, chairs, bookshelves, so we had a lot of discussion about reorganization of environment to make it an inclusive environment. And then there's the inclusive practices of looking at students with disabilities being in classrooms with their non-disabled peers, there's the models of co-teaching that folks usually use and that's sort of strategies and ways to implement inclusion practices, academically and socially, for that matter. I also think of inclusive practices when it comes to staff; when a curriculum instruction coach comes to a building and they're doing something on literacy, are they including staff or are they just targeting the individual staff? When in reality, EC staff might need to be included as well, so there's lots of different ways in my head that I think about inclusive practices ranging from students' needs all the way up to staffing needs.

Like Lisa, Mary Cary has a passion for students who receive special education services. Mary has a term she used to describe the students she is passionate about, 'outliers.' As a principal, she focused her definition on the school as a whole instead of just looking at classroom practices. She advocates for including all students and for all to have appropriate access in general education classrooms. Like Lisa, she referred to equipping the staff members with needed skills to properly include students in the regular

education classroom because that is where the majority of their time is spent. Lisa did not mention the EC teacher in her definition, and she did not mention the role of the EC teacher in the regular education class. Her focus, however, is on the classroom teacher because they have to provide equal access to the general education curriculum to all students.

I worked in math, specifically, so I think as a principal, the biggest role I see is to be an advocate for kids and I think that's one of the hardest things, is that you want everyone to feel included; you want everyone to feel a part of and in a place like this, we have about 540 students and so I think it's really easy to be an advocate. My passion tends to lie for those kids who outliers, which is really what I spoke to in my dissertation; it was really about making sure kids have equitable access in general education classrooms. I feel like even though a child may have exceptionality, in our current framework in our district, they're always in a general ed class for the majority of the day. Even some of our most severe friends, that model of having a separate class for the majority of the day is an outdated—right, so really just to make sure that general education teachers have the skills and strengths to be able to work with EC kids, you know, because a lot of our kids, who even if they have a pull out, it's only like 30 minutes a day, so the other 6 hours is on the general education teacher. I'm super passionate about that.

Dawn Palmer's definition is rooted in school-wide philosophy. Like Mary and Lisa, she has a background in special education but refers to a variety of populations in her definition. In fact, including 'everybody' is the main focus of her inclusive definition. Dawn does not refer to the general education curriculum like so many in definitions before. She pays special attention to following the individual needs of all students through differentiation. But, like Mary, her attention is focused on the entire school, where she refers to every adult as a teacher.

Well, when I think about inclusion, I think of everybody. If I were to give a one word definition of inclusion, it would be everybody and I definitely don't think of it as just being ethnic or racial inclusion, but I think of it as being children who behavior issues, children who have parents that are not supportive, children who have parents that are overly supportive; it just means everybody having a seat at the table, everybody having an equal stake and every teacher being concerned about every child's needs, because all children are different and that's one of the big things about our school. Our philosophy is that we follow the child, meaning we want to know where that child needs to go, so we follow the child and the child lets us know what they need to learn, that's why we do a lot of observing. It's not just about everybody learning the same thing, so when I think of inclusion, I just think of everybody. The school, the community, I think I consider everyone a teacher and when I say "teacher," I'm talking about cafeteria staff, I'm talking about secretaries, I'm talking about everybody, so when we say inclusion we mean everybody and we really make every effort to try to differentiate, so we can make sure that every child is getting what they need.

Throughout the interviews, participants verbalized personal definitions and discussed pivotal experiences or learning opportunities that helped to hone or clarify their understanding of inclusion and how it looks or should look in an elementary school setting. Each participant added their own intricacies to a definition. Consequently, definitions differ, but there are some commonalities or thoughts that are woven throughout the definitions. Some reoccurring ideas were education within a regular education classroom, access to the general education curriculum, and co-teaching and support for students. Despite the similarities, there was no single common or agreed-upon definition of inclusion. Each participant had a variation of understanding. Some mentioned students with exceptionalities, while others did not. Some mentioned providing education or professional development for the staff while others made no mention. Some definitions referred to equal access to the general education curriculum while others focused on following the child and providing differentiation. Some

mentioned meeting the academic needs of students, while others mentioned meeting social needs and yet others mentioned meeting physical environmental needs. There is no one common definition among participants for inclusion in an elementary school setting.

### **Theme II—Participants' Personal Definitions of Inclusion are Evolving and Not Static**

As part of the interviews, I asked participants to share their personal definitions of inclusion and what experiences or professional development shaped or altered their definition of inclusion. Most shared how their definitions are evolving based on experiences and how they embrace a growth mindset. This is what the participants had to say.

Shawn Williams knows what inclusion should be within an elementary school setting and was able to articulate it. However, he has not found a way to make his inclusion vision reality. He has discovered what he feels works well for inclusion within regular education classrooms, but he has not achieved this desired outcome in his school building. His definition is contingent on the fact each day in education, he learns about and has different experiences regarding including students with specific learning needs into general education classrooms. This new knowledge helps to fine tune or alter his definition of inclusion. The alterations help him find additional ways to meet his inclusive vision within his current school building. As such, his definition is not fixed; in fact, he refers to it as evolving. See what Shawn had to say below:

It's always evolving, so I think I can always learn more and experience more and find ways to make the experience that kids are having in school more meaningful and more impactful to their education, so I wouldn't say that it's stagnant. It probably will shift and change over time, but I feel like what we understand about

what works well is not yet where we are. I'm speaking for my school, I don't know that many schools have that experience, but I would probably say that most are where we are, where it's struggle to balance the individual needs of the students and then also how we can meet that in the regular classroom with the inclusion and co-teaching model with the limited resources that we have in ways to schedule for kids.

John shares the same sentiment about continual learning. He agrees that effective teachers or educators must continue to learn new strategies or general knowledge in order to meet the needs of the students. He does feel confident in his current working definition of inclusion.

No definition should be fixed—I tell my teachers all the time, the minute you quit learning, you can't be an effective teacher. As a principal, I take that to heart, so I won't say I have a fixed definition, but I've got one I think works for me, for now.

Melinda is satisfied with her definition of inclusion and is reflective of what is working really well and also about things that are not working. This reflection leads to questioning and ultimately changing what is not working within the inclusive setting to something that has worked in other settings and hopefully will find success in the current in the new setting. Melinda uses her current school to situate her continual learning although she does not overtly state her definition is transforming.

I'd say I'm confident with it; I think right, something that I'm reflecting on, especially in my 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade, now I've got the same teacher doing inclusion for both 3rd, 4th and 5th. 5th grade is knocking it out of the park; when you look at the percentage that you need to be proficient on an EOG, that scale score, raw score and percentage and then look at what they're doing on their benchmarks, my inclusion class in 5th grade have 12 kids and 100 percent of them are proficient or what I would say is proficient based on their scores for

math. There were 3 out of the 12 that did not show what they needed to be proficient for their reading and 3 or 4 for the science, so that combination is getting more results than my 3rd and 4th grade inclusion also it's the same inclusion teacher, so now we're trying to really look at what is it, what's different that we're getting the best results in 5th grade. 3rd and 4th are growing, but I've got my 5th grade teacher taking them from 1's to 3's and 4's and 3rd and 4th are going from 1's to 2's.

Lisa took a more global approach when asked if she was satisfied with her current definition of inclusion. She feels society is growing and changing daily, and these changes impact what is occurring in education. She even shared examples of how exceptional children's services have changed during her career in education and how including more students has become the expectation. But she also situated these changes within various factors such as situations she talked about within individual schools lead by individuals with their own ideas about inclusion. Lisa feels strongly about the need for all things to grow and change, like her definition, even if things are going well. She feels there can always be changes and alterations for the better. Her quote below shares some of these sentiments.

I think that it grows as things within society grow. I think that there's a lot of factors that play in—I think about environment, I think about academic and I think about social, but within those, there's also subgroups of things. I personally hope that it continues to evolve; I'm a big advocate and going back to my favorite thing of teaching, once I lose sight of teachers and the impact that the folks who are in front of our students daily, once I lose sight of evolving whether that's a definition of something or something that's been implemented, even if it's implemented well and it still needs to change or evolve or shift, once I lose sight of those things, I've always said I don't know if I want to stay in education.



Mary knows what inclusion should look like within a classroom setting and has a strong definition. She has studied it both in the field with on the job experiences and through scholarly research as she completed her doctoral work on the subject. She realizes, however, that her school and staff are at different places on the road to inclusion. So, like Shawn, knowing what is desired does not make it a reality. As such, much more work has to be done in order for the inclusive desire to reach all classrooms within the building. This process will take reflection, alterations, and even redefining. Mary sums this up below.

I think I'm comfortable with that definition, but I don't feel like we've arrived there. I don't feel like we as a staff here--we have a long way to go. I think we preach it a lot, but I think there's some people who still feel like, "well, that's not my job," so I still feel like we have a long way to go.

The participants in this study are comfortable with their personal definitions of inclusion. They are able to pinpoint turning points or experiences that led them to their current thinking. For example, Helen shared the following story from her early teaching career that she feels was pivotal in her learning.

Being in the classroom, because when I was in the classroom I had six EC students in there and that year they pulled them out. It was all pull outs, so my kids were coming and going throughout instruction and instead of helping them, it was creating their gaps. I would have to go back and re-teach what they had missed and of course planning time with the EC teacher was pretty much null and void. After that I realized it wasn't working and we needed to do something different and so I feel inclusion is the way to go for the majority of students.

Lisa shared a similar experience with a student that changed her thoughts about inclusion versus pullout resource. This turning point makes her confident and optimistic

about what can happen through inclusion within regular education classroom. Lisa had the following to say about this pivotal experience.

I definitely think that my very first experiences were—and I had a student who was tired of me pulling him out of a classroom, he was a 5th grader and he asked why and when he asked, I felt like, why am I? When I look at all of your information, you’ve performed just as well in some areas as your non-disabled peers, so why would I be taking you out of that environment versus working collaboratively in that environment? So that’s really honestly where the first initial—if I think about inclusive practices, it started with a student for me.

Although most of the participants are satisfied with their current definitions of inclusion, they also realize the need for continual learning. This continual learning will help them to evolve their definitions to meet the new needs of their students, staff members, school environment, or even legislation. As such, the participant definitions of inclusion are not fixed. They are working definitions that will continue to grow and change as long as new knowledge is gained and experiences evolve. Change is a constant; personal definitions are not.

### **Theme III—Participants Understood and Interpreted the District’s Definition of Inclusion Differently**

The Arrowhead School District employs the participants in this study. All are privy to the same information through district professional development and resources. This is true for the curriculum and how to address various student populations. However, through interviews, it was discovered that participants varied regarding how they understood the district’s definition of inclusion. Most participants agreed inclusion is the expectation of the district, and some talked about the district’s shift to inclusion; however, participants were unable to verbalize a district definition of inclusion and were

also unable to locate it in writing. Participants also agreed the district has not explicitly modeled how inclusion looks in practice within an elementary classroom and all operated inclusion in their schools using their varied personal definitions of inclusion. Most participants agree that their personal definition of inclusion matches the unwritten district's expectations.

John Curry agrees that the district wants to see more inclusion within elementary school buildings. However, he is unsure how this should look or what the district expects of a building level leader. He desires to include students, but awaits district directives to help him come up with building-level solutions.

I know that they mention it, I know that they want it, but I don't know that the district have put in the time or energy to say, "this is inclusion, this is what it looks like and this is how we're going to train folks to do it here."

John went on to share how this idea of inclusion was rolled out in the district in which he was previously employed as a principal. He carried over some of the information and strategies learned to his current school. He also shares the lack of this kind of professional development offering in inclusion in the Arrowhead School District.

In a previous district, they for 2 or 3 years had a summer institute specifically surrounded or built around inclusive practices. The PD was actually pretty good, I actually hate they stopped doing them, because I haven't really seen much of it in my current setting.

Shawn has been employed with ASD his entire career. Like John, he agrees that there is a district push for inclusion within the classroom, but he does not know exactly how it should look within a school setting. He also feels that his personal definition aligns

with the district's unwritten expectations. He expressed that inclusion is easier in theory than in practice.

I feel like the district's definition is similar to my definition. I think that from the district's perspective, ideally we would want to see more inclusion happening in the classroom than we probably do in our schools, so I think the need there is to align the vision of what we want to see happening with our EC students in inclusion, but also the methods of how that can happen in schools and make that meaningful. I think my definition of what I would like to see in the school is similar to what the district would like to see; the difference is, it's easier said than done.

Melinda was similarly unable to share the district's definition of inclusion without having to search for it. But she senses a change in the understanding of how to meet the needs of students with exceptionalities due to her interactions with people throughout the district and the changes in the EC world. Unlike the other participants, Melinda recalls an optional training on inclusive practices, but she did not attend and is not sure what information was shared. In her implementation of inclusion in her school, she relies on her personal definition, feedback on individual student cases from the district level, and a focus on data.

Our district's definition? I don't think that I can state that to you verbatim without having to look it up on the websites. I do think that it has changed in terms of just feedback that we hear from different people. There are lots of changes happening in our EC world right now in our school system . . . I would say probably being student driven and making sure that we're making those choices based on the needs of our students. I do know that there has been some professional development and such related to the inclusion model. I can't say specifically – I didn't participate, and they didn't give us any formal information related to that, but just individual situations that we've reflected on with our PA and such, it's definitely student driven and that we need to make sure we're meeting the needs of our students.

Dawn was also unable to share a specific district definition. Instead, she feels as though the district's definition is in alignment with her personal definition of inclusion with a focus on differentiation. She did not refer to a specific definition for inclusion but instead inferred that the district's new framework was inclusive for all, or as she shared earlier in her personal definition, 'everybody.' In her conversation, there was no mention of how this new inclusive framework should look in practice within an elementary school building.

I think the district definition would have something to do with differentiating for each child; also, the new frameworks that is . . . So, yes, I think—transformational, that's what I was thinking of, transformational framework. Because it does include the growth mindset relationships; diversity, critical thinking, racial equity, and consistency, I think the district framework would be very supportive of and very inclusive.

Helen's understanding of inclusion is much like John and Shawn's. She knows that inclusion is the expectation, but the district has not shared exactly how it should look within a classroom setting. Instead, this lack of explicit direction leads her to think that it is up to the building-level principal. Like Shawn, she agrees that her personal definition is in tandem with the district's expectation in its simplest form of all kids being included and having grade-level instruction.

It's similar to mine in that it means that kids are included in the regular ed with their regular peers for the majority of the day and it doesn't go far as to define what that looks like as far as who's doing what, who should be doing what—that's left up to individual schools and individual buildings.

Unlike other participants, Lisa had a lot to say about the district's stance on inclusion at the school level. As a district-level leader, she is privy to meetings, discussions, and school visits that the other principals are not. She leans on the information gained through these interactions to influence what she feels is the district's definition of inclusion. Even as someone working in the Exceptional Children's or EC department, however, Lisa was unable to concretely share what the definition is or how it should look within school buildings. She mentioned the variations of inclusion in school buildings and also the confirmation of the shift to inclusion in the area of curriculum.

I think that varies and I think that it depends on who you're talking to, in all honesty. I can say that from the meetings that I've sat in—I will tell you I feel as though, very strongly, there's a lot of folks that are in the regular ed wheelhouse that support all students and there's a lot of folks in that wheelhouse where their focus is a content area or a specialty area and they're speaking a lot of the same language as our department. As far as inclusive practices, if there is a balanced literacy framework and materials being used with a student, then they should be getting that in the regular ed setting and then an EC teacher, I had to supplement the materials build upon that versus oh wait, the EC teacher's doing everything the regular ed teacher's doing and so the student's not getting anymore. They're getting the same thing. There's definitely been a huge shift in at least some of the discussions that I've been privy to, which I think is absolutely positive and fantastic and I hope that it continues to flourish. There continues to be a collaborative effort, because it's not a special ed department and it's not a curriculum instruction department, it's here's all of our kids, how do we collaboratively work together.

Lisa continued her thoughts on how inclusion looks throughout various buildings in the district. She feels that despite a district push or focus on inclusion, inclusion will look and feel different within schools. This variance, in her opinion, has to do with the mindsets and feelings of the school level principals and the other staff within a school. She went on to say that an observer can tell if the definition of inclusion is aligned and

thriving within schools based on what is going on in the building and the conversations that are being had. Despite the varied understandings and stages of implementation, she feels that a universal feeling of inclusion is possible. However, it will take a considerable amount of time to achieve because there have to be trainings, and most importantly, a shift in the mindsets to being open to embrace and include all.

I think that it varies, I think you can walk into some buildings—it doesn't matter how big or small a school district is, if there's multiple schools, there's multiple cultures and there's multiple feelings, mindsets. I think that you can walk into an environment and there's a school where you can tell their definition is the same and rocking and rolling and everybody's on the same page. You can walk into a building and there's some people in that building that have the same mindset and some that don't and then you can walk into another building and it's like absolutely not, I'm not going to move that table so this kid can get over to that side of the classroom and the leadership of that building is saying my teacher's not going to move that table, you see what I'm saying? I think that environments differ and I think that's just a natural thing, depending on where you're at. Will there ever be a universal feeling? I think that it's possible, but I think it also takes time, you don't go zero to sixty, going back to the definition, there's a mindset piece of it and shifting that is tough.

The district has made a stance for inclusion within schools and has even disbanded many specialized self-contained classrooms within the district. However, building level administrators are left wondering exactly how to include students within a regular classroom setting while meeting the varied needs of the students through support. Principals were unable to pinpoint an exact definition or guide to help them with implementation. Participants were able to recall a professional development offering or an in-service on inclusion within the district. Participants lean on their personal definition of inclusion to facilitate inclusion within their buildings and to teach and guide their staff

on inclusive practices. In short, Arrowhead School District does not have a working definition of inclusion that the principals in the study can articulate. Also, principals used personal knowledge to color their understanding of the district's definition and expectations.

#### **Theme IV—Participants Described Varied Characteristics for Leadership for Inclusion**

Principals in the Arrowhead School District are tasked with creating an inclusive classroom setting for their students who have Individual Education Plans (IEPs), according to the principals in this study. Participants shared an expectation that certain things must be in place at the school leadership level for the staff members to embrace the directive. When asked what tenets or characteristics that they think best characterize leadership for inclusion, participant responses varied and were related to their current school setting and what they believe based on their personal definitions of inclusion.

John feels that being able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of school staff members is a key tenet in leadership for inclusion. He feels this tenet is imperative when trying to create appropriate classroom settings for students who have exceptionalities. Staff members have to have the skill to meet the educational, social, and sometimes physical needs of students. Another desired characteristic, according to John, is openness or transparency with the staff. Staff members need to know what's going on and why decisions are being made. The quote below shares his thoughts on inclusive leadership characteristics.

Well I think you need to be able to look at the strengths of your teachers, look at their kids and be able to match teacher strengths with kids' weaknesses for



opportunities for learning. After that, it's about being open and transparent with staff; often the issues you find with core teachers, they'll say, "why do those kids have to be in here," you don't think that you'd hear that in the 21st century, but you do. So, getting teachers to really understand that they have a right to a free appropriate public education. The resource pot isn't getting any bigger, so in order to make sure we maximize every person, every skill, this is the best way to do it and we're going to support you doing that, so it's being also open as well as transparent with what you're doing and why.

Helen has definitive thoughts about what characteristics principals need to lead inclusion within a school. The first tenet or characteristic is a rather familiar saying in education: You must believe that all kids can learn. She believes this thought is key, but having this belief does not mean anything without work. She feels that an inclusive leader must provide the resources to make inclusion possible, which ushers in her next thought. Principals have to be willing to think outside of the box to make inclusion work for students and staff members. Helen explains further below.

You have to truly believe that all kids can learn and we say that, it's cliché, but you've got to truly believe that all kids can learn and then you have to have the wherewithal to put the right resources with those kids. You can say it, but if you don't put any meat behind, any support behind it then you're just saying it to be saying it. You can say "I want inclusion," but then you've got to give them the tools to make it work like fixing the master schedule for them or giving them the resources or changing the personnel, so you have to be able to be willing to move things around and shuffle things to make it work if that's what you really say you're going to do.

Shawn Williams feels that certain experiences or jobs in education provide characteristics for leadership for inclusion. For example, he feels that administrators who are best equipped to lead for inclusion have some background working with students who have differentiated needs as an EC teacher or regular education teacher in an inclusive

setting. He feels this personal experience can help alter the feelings of individuals of staff that may be reluctant about inclusion. He elaborates on his thinking in the quote below.

I think principals that have had experience exceptional children—either as a classroom teacher that supported EC students, which would be most everyone, but particularly principals that come from an EC background whether they were an EC teacher or did inclusion with an EC teacher in their classroom. I think the principals that probably best understand that are ones that have had the personal experience or have a strong EC team at their school that sort of provide them with information that helps shift their thinking about EC and how that works.

Melinda's initial characteristics for leadership for inclusion are practical and legally necessary. She feels that knowledge of regular education law and special education law are a must since laws govern what can and cannot be done in a school to meet the needs of all students. She then went on to discuss the needs of principals within the building on a day-to-day basis beyond the book knowledge. She emphasized the importance of active involvement that helps teachers see everyone is in it together and working towards a common goal of student learning. Lastly, she discussed the characteristic of follow-through and checking to make sure staff members are meeting expectations. In short, leaders for inclusion must inspect the work they assign and expect.

I think a principal that is knowledgeable of not just regular ed law, but EC law as well and then also knowledgeable of the needs of their students, you know. You can't just leave it to others to do it all, you have to be involved, you have to be actively involved so that you're an active participant in all of those decisions that are made, but then also helping to set the example and rolling up your sleeves and getting into it with them so that they see that we do support and our teachers do see that we support what they're working on to meet the needs of their students, but then also holding them accountable for it. If you set the expectation, then you don't follow up with it, then you're not going to get the results that you need to get.

Dawn's leadership characteristics did not speak directly to inclusion, but rather covered overall leadership. Her first characteristic is leading by example. This means consistency in doing the tasks you ask your staff members to do. This way, the leader acts as a model for expected behavior. Listening was a characteristic that Dawn feels is necessary for leadership. The last characteristic is admitting when you are wrong and apologizing not only to staff members but also to parents and students. The quote below elaborates on Dawn's thinking.

The first thing coming to my mind is leading by example. That's the first one and probably the most important one. I could probably put everything underneath that umbrella, because when you're working with parents, you have to show that you're willing to listen, you have to not always want to be right, you have to apologize when necessary . . . The way you talk to children, the way you talk to adults—the biggest piece to me is just leading by example.

Mary had a lot to say about leadership characteristics for inclusion based on her own personal experiences. She discussed the need to be flexible because things do not always work out as intended, and leaders have to be able to make adjustments. Having to go to people who are champions for kids is another desirable characteristic. This characteristic helps to take some of the pressure off the principal because there are other people who can help share the vision and who will help meet the needs of students. The last desirable characteristic is one that Mary feels is a personal weakness. Knowing when to let go of the things you cannot change or control is a difficult trait to learn. Mary reiterates this sentiment below:

I said I need for you to be flexible and the other thing is that you need to have a set of go-to people that you know are champions for kids, too. I have my posse

group of people that say, “we’re going to do what’s right for kids,” and you can get on board or get off the boat. I think you have to be able to know—which is one thing I’m not good at—is letting it go and I don’t let it go.

Lisa compiled her characteristics based on the leadership she experiences when she visits various schools, checking on how students who receive special education services are being served. Her first desired trait is that principals for inclusion should have an open-door policy and be willing to collaborate and get feedback. Consistency is another characteristic Lisa mentioned when speaking about leadership characteristics for inclusion. She spoke more specifically about district-level leadership with this particular characteristic. Lastly, collaboration with district leadership was mentioned and in order to make this collaboration fruitful Lisa reiterated the importance of considering the perspectives of others.

In my opinion it’s the ones who have that open-door policy of having other sets of eyes in their building in collaborating. It’s not a characteristic of please come in my building and do this for me, I’m still control of my building, but I have this team of people that typically are district people that help me guide in decision making in my building. I think that that’s key and some folks view that as oh goodness, district leadership’s in my building, I don’t want them to dig into anything to see what’s happening. I think there’s also some stigma to oh goodness, they’re in here to just tell me what’s going wrong and I think there’s also some stigma that you come in here and then you’re going to leave and that’s it, so one of the things that I feel very strongly is a characteristic that’s needed to work with district leadership is to show up consistently and it’s not hey I’m here advising you on this, bye, and won’t see you for another three months, it’s very intentional. We’re still here, we’re still working together, we’re still working collaboratively, so I think that if you give that piece of allowing the collaboration to come into your building, it’s still your building. You’re right, I think that’s the one thing that district folks can forget, too, a school administrator is pulled in ten thousand different directions and it’s just like in exceptional children, we impact everything. We impact transportation, we impact student nutrition, we impact school facilities – every aspect and then those are all also and a school administrator has all of those hats, too. I think being able to navigate the

consistency of showing up, the openness to be able to have those conversations and respect each other's positions. Sometimes, district leadership has sat in a principal's chair and done that work before and sometimes, they haven't and then sometimes a principal has sat in a district leader's chair and sometimes, they haven't. It's navigating where have you sat, so you can build upon and be helpful.

Table 3

## Characteristics for Inclusive Leadership

Participants	Characteristics for Inclusive Leadership
Mary	Flexibility, ability to identify a set of allies, know how to let go of things out of your control
Susan	Know the importance of meeting the needs of students, work to fill gaps, working with families to make sure students feel included
Shawn	Have some experience working with exceptional children as a special education teacher, inclusion teacher, etc.
John	Identify strengths in teachers, be able to match teacher strengths to student needs, transparency, getting regular education teachers to understand FAPE,
Melinda	Knowledge of regular education laws and special education laws, knowledge of student needs in the school, be actively involved, setting the example with work by rolling up your sleeves, set expectation and hold teachers accountable
Dawn	Leading by example, apologize when necessary
Lisa (District Leader)	Have an open-door policy, collaboration, consistency, respect each other's positions
Helen	Believe that all kids can learn, provide support, provide resources, alter schedules etc. to make inclusion work

All participants could identify a list of characteristics they felt were needed by principals who wanted to lead inclusion within their school buildings or at the district level. The identified characteristics are viable based on the personal experiences or expertise of the participants and their work in elementary school leadership. Participants, such as Mary, also identified characteristics they felt they needed to improve upon. During the interviews, no characteristics were included on multiple lists. In short, there is not an exhaustive list of desirable characteristics for principals in the study who value/use/believe and lead inclusive elementary schools. Instead, participants shared characteristics that connect to their personal definition of inclusion or to characteristics they wish to possess.

### **Observations**

I selected two principals to observe based on their ability to clearly articulate their definition of inclusion, my interest during the semi-structured interview in how they live their definition, and their willingness to allow me to visit their schools. The purpose of the observations was to see how the principals lived and shared their definitions of inclusion with staff. The observation times were mutually decided upon in order to gain the most fruitful data.

#### **Observation with Mary Cary**

During our interview, Mary shared her passion for meeting the needs of students who receive services within the exceptional children's department in her school and beyond during the semi-structured interview.

My passion tends to lie for those kids who are outliers, which is really what I spoke to in my dissertation; it was really about making sure kids have equitable access in general education classrooms.

Mary eagerly agreed to participate in the observation and a second interview. We agreed that I would shadow her during a typical day so that I could have an authentic experience instead of one created.

**Observation day.** I drove to the front of the school, parked in a visitor's space, and walked to the front door. The area was well maintained, and there were signs welcoming visitors. I pressed a button that appeared to have a camera attached and I was granted entry with a single beep. Mary greeted me in the front office, and we briefly discussed the day's events. First, Mary shared that we would deliver sweet staff treats throughout the building in order to show the staff her appreciation for their hard work. Next, we would visit general education classes based on the students included. We would continue to a pullout resource room to complete the observation portion of the day. Finally, we would return to her office to complete the follow-up interview and debriefing.

We loaded a rolling cart with a variety of donuts from a local bakery. Mary shared how much the staff loved this bakery and encouraged me to try a donut. I declined the offer, and we started our journey through the school pushing the 'Sweet Cart.' We met two staff members in the hallway near the front office. Mary introduced me, and the two staff members (the academically gifted teacher and the school social worker) greeted me warmly. One accepted a treat, and the other one did not. We continued on our way to the main building. We approached what appeared to be a fourth- or fifth-grade male student who asked Mary when could he come to see her again. Mary let him know that she would

make arrangements with his teacher. When the student entered the classroom, Mary shared that this student received EC services and that he had a difficult time adjusting to the school when he first arrived. She shared his then teacher was a novice and did not know how to deal with his special needs and was frightened by what was included in his cumulative folder. Mary stated that she spent much time with him in his first year getting to know his needs and coming up with a plan to help him be successful here. It is now two years later, and he is doing well and only has to see her occasionally more as a reward. We continued down each hall in the main building, greeting various teachers who accepted a treat.

As we walked, Mary shared that there are approximately 50 students in the building with IEPs, several of whom had been returned to the school from self-contained classrooms in the district that had been dispersed in an attempt to have students in the least restrictive environment. As we entered the fourth- and fifth-grade hallway, Mary shared that the fifth grade was departmentalized, and switching classes was difficult for one particular student. The student did much better with the science teacher and his hands-on approach and did not do well with the stern veteran English Language Arts (ELA) teacher, who insisted that he sit quietly on his bottom. She went on to say that the student visited her office frequently due to calls from the ELA teacher.

We entered the ELA classroom delivering sweet treats and discovered the student we were just discussing sitting isolated in the back of the classroom. The teacher approached the 'sweet cart' and began to explain that the student had been disruptive; the others were working on an individual graded assignment, and he was disturbing them.



She went on to say she had called the office for the assistant principal but moved the student in the back for the meantime. Mary seemed very agitated. She asked the ELA teacher what the student was working on, and she was unable to say for sure but agreed it was not what the others were working on. I could tell Mary was not happy, but restrained herself because I was in the room. Mary approached the student and talked to him for a while. I stayed by the 'sweet cart' to give them privacy, and the teacher took a treat before returning to her remaining students. Mary returned to where I was standing, and we left the room. Once in the hallway, Mary called her assistant principal on the walkie talkie and shared he needed to come "rescue" the student and be sure to get the correct assignment. We continued, and Mary stated, "that's what I was talking about." The student was not doing anything drastic, but it was not exactly what the teacher wanted him to do, so she just dismissed him. She said she would speak to the teacher again as she had done in the past. However, it really does not have much effect on her because she had great test scores, and she is revered in the school and the community. Mary said it did not even matter when she included this negative information on her formal evaluations because the teacher is on the way to retirement. She went on to say that she hopes this is the ELA teacher's retirement year with a smile. She ended this exchange by saying that as for now, she was going to do what was best for the student.

Next, we stopped in the classroom of the fourth-grade science teacher. He was with a group of students, helping them with a hands-on activity. Both the teacher and the students seemed engaged. There was a slight buzz of working noise as the students worked on the task. The science teacher noticed us and came to the door. Mary

introduced me as a colleague and offered him a sweet treat. He gladly accepted and thanked us. We left the room, and Mary shared that the student from the previous class flourished in the science class because of the hands-on learning and the acceptance of the teacher. We then left the main building and entered a secondary building. The first person we greeted in this building was the music teacher. The room was colorful, and the teacher was in between classes at the time. Mrs. Cary introduced me again as a colleague who was interested in inclusion for students who received EC services. The music teacher shared her interest and stated she enjoyed working with all students and that many students who received EC services thrived in her classroom.

We continued on our way and delivered sweet treats to the teachers in the kindergarten and first-grade hallway. The hallway was filled with colorful student work and some permanent mosaics. The physical education teacher greeted us in the hallway and helped herself to a sweet treat and continued to greet her next class. We stopped at each classroom in this hallway, and teachers smiled and enjoyed treats. We did not have conversations with teachers because they were involved with teaching. Several were seated at the front of the room with their students who were seated on the carpet for instruction. On our trip back to the office, we passed by the second-grade classrooms and delivered treats. Mrs. Cary shared that second grade had fewer students who received exceptional children services than any other grade. We re-entered the main building and stopped in the pre-k classroom. Most students were in stations or on the carpet with the teacher. One student sat alone at a table, still eating breakfast, and it was well after breakfast time. The student's clothes and mouth were messy, as if he was having

difficulty feeding himself. Mary went directly over to the student and assisted him with cleaning his hands, face, and mouth. She then directed one of the ladies in the room to change his shirt. It was evident that the student had some unique learning needs. The teachers in the room enjoyed their treats, and we headed back to the front office to drop off the 'sweet cart.' Once in Mary's office, she shared that the student in the pre-K class was the object of great discussion for some of the staff, the families of students in pre-K, and the close-knit community. The student lived in the community. Many parents witnessed his extreme outbursts in the community and did not feel he should be educated in a regular classroom. Many even wanted not to allow him to come to pre-K. Mary stated that she wanted to keep him now and begin learning how to meet his special needs instead of waiting for kindergarten. She went on to say this was best for the student and the school. This way, his kindergarten year will be more productive and successful, and if this is truly not the setting, they will be better informed about specific educational needs.

After this conversation, we headed to an exceptional children's resource room. The EC teacher was working with a group of five fifth-grade students. Mary and I sat down in two empty desks behind the students. Students were sitting in a circular formation at a kidney-shaped table, and the teacher was seated on the opposite side in the center. Each student was working on a literacy task, but they all seemed to be differentiated by student needs or goals. The teacher worked quietly, one-on-one with each student. The others quietly worked in their desks. However, one student was away from the group on a desktop computer. He made frequent outbursts or sounds according to whatever was on the computer screen. The other students seemed unbothered by the

sounds and continued to work. The teacher went over to see what the student needed and reminded him to work and let others work. The teacher returned to the group and helped them wrap up whatever they were working on so they could return to class. The teacher stood at the door as students walked back to their classrooms, which were in the same hallway. The young man on the computer remained in the classroom and was called over to the teacher to work on sight word identification located in individual folders. He came over after lots of prompting. Mary shared that this student had also been exited from a self-contained classroom with four other students, a teacher, and a teacher's assistant. His transition team gave him maximum service times, which means he is almost self-contained in his current setting. She went on to share that he is only in the regular classroom for lunch, recess, and specials when he chooses to cooperate. As we continued sitting there, the student noticed us talking and asked who the hell is she. He was referring to me. Mary told him that I was a friend who was visiting from another school. This did not seem to make him happy because he continued saying curse words. Mary approached him and started helping him with his sight words. After a while, he was okay and forgot I was there. We stayed for about 10 more minutes until the other EC teacher entered with another group of students from third grade. We returned to Mary's office for our second interview, which included scenarios.

**Observation findings.** During the observation, Mary expressed many of the same sentiments shared during her initial interview about her definition of inclusion. In her initial interview, and even in her definition, she discussed having a particular interest in students who had exceptional needs or students she referred to as outliers. This interest

carried over into the students she identified with during the time I shadowed her. For example, during our walk, we met a fifth-grade male student asking when he could spend time with Mary. Mary explained he was a student she spent much time with during his transition from a self-contained classroom to a regular education setting. In this example, she was living out her definition.

Mary shared the specific needs of students and also some staff needs or inadequacies during the observation. In Mary's definition excerpt below, she used the term advocate.

I worked in math, specifically, so I think as a principal, the biggest role I see is to be an advocate for kids and I think that's one of the hardest things, is that you want everyone to feel included; you want everyone to feel a part of and in a place like this, we have about 540 students and so I think it's really easy to be an advocate.

During the observation, there were two detailed examples of Mary acting as an advocate for the students. The first example is when she rescued the male student from the non-inclusive fifth-grade teacher by calling her assistant principal to come to get the student from class so his IEP goals and individual learning needs for the day could be met. She made sure the student was allowed to work on the grade level assignment like his peers. However, this anecdote also shows the limits Mary has with changing the practice of the teacher. The best she can do is hope the teacher will retire. The second example of advocacy Mary exhibited during my observation was during the discussion about the Pre-kindergarten student. During the observation, she cared for the student's physical needs by helping clean his face and hands and making sure his shirt was changed. She shared

how she had to advocate with both staff members and parents from the community. In the end, Mary was living by her definition and doing what she felt was best for that student.

Mary also made mention of one of the desired characteristics for inclusion she discussed during her initial interview: knowing when to let go of things she cannot change. She discussed this sentiment when speaking about the current district expectations of including all students with no added support or teacher training. Specifically, she highlighted the district's push for inclusion and lack of support implementing it during the time spent in the EC classroom with the student who was moved from a small self-contained environment to her school with maximum resource time. She commented that she was unable to change this, but she had the power to make inclusion work for her students and staff members. Mary also expressed a desire to exercise this tenet when dealing with the fifth-grade ELA teacher. She shared how conversations and observations did not change the teacher's actions, but she did work to make sure the student got what he needed.

We visited several classrooms during the observation where a variety of students were included as well as students who had specific needs according to their IEPs. Mary elaborated on her school's use of her definition of inclusion in the following statement: "Our car is parked on the road, you know. Some people are peddling away and other friends are just sitting, but at least on the road [laughter]."

Mrs. Cary is aware that her school and staff have not fully implemented or adapted her inclusive definition, but they are at least making progress. This was evident

in many classrooms and was glaring in certain classrooms, such as in the case of the ELA teacher, who was not inclusive, and the science teacher, who was inclusive.

### **Observation with Helen Bowman**

Helen shared her strong opinion about including a majority of students in regular education classrooms due to her experiences as a classroom teacher and having to try to close gaps for students who were pulled out for instruction in the resource classroom.

Being in the classroom, because when I was in the classroom, I had six EC students in there and that year they pulled them out. It was all pull outs, so my kids were coming and going throughout instruction and instead of helping them, it was creating their gaps. I would have to go back and re-teach what they had missed and of course planning time with the EC teacher was pretty much null and void. After that I realized it wasn't working and we needed to do something different and so I feel inclusion is the way to go for the majority of students.

Helen agreed to a shadowing experience but wanted to be purposeful about my visit and what I was able to see. We discussed a staff meeting or coming for a regular day and just walking around. She decided against this and wanted me to sit in on with grade levels and the retention committee. She stated there should be students with exceptionalities discussed.

**Observation day.** I drove in the front parking lot of the school just as buses left from unloading students. I found a parking space and walked down the sidewalk towards the front door of what appeared to be the main building. I pressed the yellow buzzer found on the right of the door. I was greeted by a voice asking, "How I may help you?" I explained that I had an appointment with Helen, and I was granted entry. The main office was located on the left. I was asked to have a seat and Helen would be right there.

I waited for about 3 minutes, and Helen greeted me and invited me into her office. She shared the schedule for the day. She stated the meetings would follow their regular Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting times, starting with fifth grade. Helen shared a copy of what teachers were expected to bring to the meeting: current overall grades, assessment grades (school and district), any state testing results, interventions, progress monitoring and the results, parent contact logs, a completed Light's Retention Scale, and records of collaboration with support services if students received Exceptional Children services or English Language Learning services. The information would be placed on a recording sheet for each student. The recording sheet also has a space for a decision and a place for each team member to sign in support of the decision. The completed form would be placed in the cumulative folder for future reference.

We walked to what appeared to be a staff meeting room because school-wide data was posted. We sat down and waited for about 2 minutes, and the three fifth-grade teachers entered. They carried folders. Mrs. Bowman asked if they had any students to present, and they stated no. The English Language Arts (ELA) teacher went on to say that they had some collective concerns for a few students but felt retention would be detrimental to them socially at this point. The ELA teacher continued and shared a list consisting of three students. The first student on the list was male. He was struggling in reading. The ELA teacher shared that his current reading level was equivalent to a second-grader. Helen inquired what interventions had been tried. The ELA shared that the student was in the Intervention and Support process and was receiving a reading and writing intervention three times a week and had some minimal progress. The curriculum



specialist asked how many weeks the student had been receiving the intervention, and the math teacher answered about 4 weeks. Helen inquired as to why the student had not been referred to IST sooner, and the math teacher, who was the student's homeroom teacher, responded that the student's mom had just recently agreed to IST, but that they had been in contact all year. The team continued to discuss the student and decided that since the student was closer to grade level in math, they would place the student in sixth grade. Helen instructed the teachers to work with the school counselor to find out the middle school the student would attend and what service the school offered for reading remediation.

Next, the fifth-grade teachers discussed a female student who had difficulty in all subjects and has had difficulty throughout her schooling. Helen filled me in on the student's history. The young lady was referred to IST in first grade and did not show progress with the interventions. The interventions were changed several times before the student was sent on for a full evaluation. The parents were reluctant and did not want their daughter to be labeled, but finally agreed to have additional testing just to gain information. The test was completed during the young lady's third-grade year, and discrepancies were present. A meeting was held to share the findings, and the parents refused to let their daughter receive services. I asked what course of action did the school take. Helen stated the student was placed back in IST and continued to receive intervention. However, the student could not receive services, modified grading, or assignments, and her grades reflected it. Helen did share the student was placed in the fifth-grade inclusion class and benefited from the extra push in support for both reading

and math. Helen agreed to meet with the parents one more time regarding their student's academic growth and the team's overall concerns in hopes of finding a way to help the student. The discussion for the last student had to be carried over to another meeting because it was time for the teachers to pick up their students from specials. We had about a thirty-minute break before the next meeting. Helen went to her office to return phone calls. I stayed in the meeting room to process what had taken place so far.

Next, the third-grade teachers joined us in the meeting room. The English Language Learner (ELL) teacher also attended. One of the third-grade teachers started the conversation with one of her students. She started by sharing background information about the student. The student was a male student who had enrolled at the beginning of April. Before this time, the student was in a home school setting with mom as the teacher. The teacher went on to say the student was enrolled in a neighboring county for kindergarten and half of first grade, and according to report cards and progress reports included in the cumulative folder, there were academic and behavioral concerns. The third-grade teacher went on to share assessment information. The student was a reading level C, which is equivalent to the end of kindergarten, and his math skills suffered due to his reading. The teacher shared district, school, and classroom assessment data, all of which were well below grade-level standards. The teacher shared that math was the student's strength, but that his reading skills prevented the student from tackling word problems. He was also missing many of the foundational math skills required to understand third-grade math and beyond. Helen inquired about communication with the parents. The teacher shared that she had been in constant contact with dad, but that mom

was not included in any paperwork. Dad just agreed to IST during their last conference, and they were in the process of completing the initial requirements. Helen asked about how retention would affect the student socially. The teacher commented that the student probably would not like it, but because he had been at school for such a short time, he would not have to deal with peer pressure from other students. The committee agreed to retention unless the student passed End-of-Grade testing for math and ELA. Helen would meet with dad to share data and the committee's suggestion. She went on to tell the committee that she has seen retentions be successful and not successful, but the key to student success was to have agreement from parents.

One of the other third-grade teachers had a student up for retention. The ELL teacher was also there to speak on behalf of the student because the student received ELL services. The ELL teacher shared ELL background and proficiency information. The student had been in ELL since kindergarten, and as a third grader was still at the beginning level in reading, listening, and writing, according to ELL state assessments. She went on to share that the student does not seem to retain information from day to day, and she feels that it is more than access to language or language proficiency. They continued the conversation and shared assessment data for the class, district, and state. The student's reading level was equivalent to the middle of first grade according to the teacher, and the math skills were closer to the middle of second due to the read-aloud modification offered because of his ELL status. The teacher also shared the Light's Retention Scale score, which was favorable for retention. Helen asked about parent communication and other interventions. The ELL teacher shared that parents were

concerned about the student because his older sibling was flourishing in school, and that they often get frustrated with him because he has difficulty completing his homework assignments, even if they are simple. The teacher shared that the student was in the IST process since the beginning of the year and had made slight progress. The teacher shared that he is still below grade-level expectations, even with the interventions. Helen inquired what the interventions were and what were the scores to the progress monitoring. The teacher shared that the student had two ELA goals; one was for fluency, and the other was for comprehension and one for math fact fluency. She was unable to share progress monitoring scores because she did not have that folder. The team agreed to table the discussion until that information was shared. None of the other third-grade teachers had students to present, and they were released to pick up their students.

We remained in the room and waited for the next grade level, which was fourth. The three teachers entered. None of them had the folders like the previous grade level. Helen asked if they had any students to present. They replied no. She continued and asked if there were students who they had academic concerns about. One teacher replied yes and that she had three students in the IST process, but they were making good growth with the interventions, and two of their interventions had been changed due to the process. The other teacher said she did not have any major concerns. She identified herself as the inclusion classroom teacher and went on to say her students were working well and making steady progress due to the daily differentiated small group instruction. Mrs. Helen Bowman asked if every student was seen daily in ELA and math. The teacher stated yes, because she has a student teacher and the EC teacher also has a student

teacher. The last teacher shared that she initially had concerns about a girl, but that the student had improved significantly throughout the year and that her reading level had moved from a grade level and a half below and is now where she should be, according to her last reading assessment. Helen asked what helped with this growth. The teacher shared that the student saw a tutor during the day with a small group and after school. She went on to say that the parents were very supportive, and she could tell they worked with the student at home. The retention committee conversation ended, and the teachers started to talk about their lesson plans for the next week before leaving the room.

Kindergarten was the next grade level to come to the room. We had to wait for about 15 minutes due to a slight lunch back up. During this time, Helen talked about how the kindergarten grade level taught guided reading across the grade level, so their conversation would be different. She shared that students were assessed and grouped based on their reading levels. Teachers taught students based on their strengths, so the teacher who worked well with below grade level students and was EC certified worked with the students with the most need. I asked how often groups were changed. Helen shared that students were formally assessed four times throughout the year. However, the groups were flexible because as students progressed, the grade level shared data during PLCs and moved students often to meet their needs.

The teachers entered the room, and the conversation started with the discussion of a female student. The guided reading teacher led the discussion because the student's classroom teacher was out for a while due to illness. The teacher shared that the student had not made any measurable progress in reading according to formal assessments, and

the reading level remained the same—well below grade level—and in math, the student could only count to 20 without assistance. Helen asked how the student was doing in guided reading. The teacher replied that the student did not retain knowledge or skills from day-to-day. For example, the student could recognize all letters one day, and the next day, miss seven letters. Mary continued by asking if the daytime tutor saw the student. The response was yes. Another teacher chimed in that the classroom teacher had started IST referral papers at the end of the second quarter, but she was not sure if they were ever completed. Helen picked up the phone and called the IST coordinator to bring her current caseload list. As the group waited, they continued sharing work samples from the student. The coordinator arrived and let the group know that she had not received referral papers for that student. Helen asked the kindergarten teachers if they could work on getting that paperwork completed, and they agreed. One of the teachers stated she did not feel comfortable placing the student in first grade when she lacked skills appropriate for the beginning of kindergarten. The other teachers agreed. Helen asked about parent support for or against retention. The guided reading teacher stated that she was in frequent contact with the mom, and the mom was also concerned. With that, the team decided to retain her with IST interventions in the works. Mrs. Bowman looked at the kindergarten list and realized there were five more students to discuss. The team decided on another meeting time hurrying out of the room to pick up their students.

Helen and I had lunch together, followed by a brief tour of the school. During the tour, Helen shared information about special education services. She shared that there are three fulltime exceptional children teachers and one EC teacher assistant. She also shared

that her goal was to have full inclusion, but that it was difficult in kindergarten due to the varied needs/extreme behaviors/max service time of the students. She went on to share that all students in third through fifth were fully included and that all second-grade students were fully included in literacy instruction. I inquired about how inclusion worked in the upper grades. Helen shared that students were strategically placed in clusters with teachers who work well with differentiation and also work appropriately with support staff. She also discussed how the EC and regular education teachers had to work together through trial and error to meet the needs of the students because there was not a particular training for co-teaching or inclusion.

We returned to the meeting space, and the first-grade team of four joined us. Helen inquired about retention candidates, and one teacher chimed in that during the middle of the year, she had a student who was a candidate for retention, but the student had made great progress. The team inquired about what helped the student grow. The teacher shared that the parents became very involved after they received the midyear retention possibility letter. She also shared that the student saw the daytime tutor twice a week for interventions and daily guided reading across the grade level using Leveled Literacy Intervention, which played a big part in reading growth. Next, the grade level shared information about a male student in her class. She started by sharing information about the student's current performance. The student's current reading level is level C, which is lower than the end-of-year kindergarten expectation. In math, the student can do simple addition problems but needs counters to solve simple subtraction problems. The teacher went on to share that the student was already in IST and had been receiving

intervention in reading and math for the last 4 weeks and had not met the progress monitoring goal for reading or math. Helen asked how the parents felt about retention. The teacher stated that the parents were fine with retention because they wanted to make sure their son had a good foundation before going to the next grade. Helen then asked if the student is retained what would be different? She went on to say that more of the same thing may not work for the student. The other teachers chimed in and said a different teacher might help, as well as continued IST interventions. The grade-level chair shared that it would not be in the best interest of the student to send him to second grade reading below the end of year level for kindergarten. The team agreed, and they signed a sheet in agreement. Helen agreed to contact the parents. The team left to pick up their students.

The second-grade team was the last group of teachers for the day. The resource teacher came to this meeting. The second-grade teachers let us know that we would be discussing a set of twins starting with information from the resource teacher. The resource teacher shared that the sisters had recently started to receive services from the exceptional children's department. She shared that both girls were extremely below grade level in all subjects and that according to documentation in the cumulative folders, they had been up for retention every year since kindergarten, and the resource teacher had a copy of this documentation. Helen asked the teacher if she could share the reason the team decided to promote the girls in kindergarten and first grade. The resource teacher shared that in kindergarten, the team decided to try IST intervention before retention. Mom agreed to sign the necessary paperwork because she did not want her daughters retained. At the end of first grade, mom agreed to IST again because she never signed the



paperwork, and she also agreed to summer school. Mom was adamant not to retain the girls. Helen added that mom also stated that the girls were going to live with grandma out of state because they were too much for her to handle.

The teacher of one of the girls gave current data for the student in her class, Egypt. She let the team know that the student was pre-reading and was basically able to do print concepts and that she was still unable to say or write her numbers to 100, which is a first-grade skill. She went on to say that Egypt could not do any grade-level work without assistance and would often shutdown and moan for long periods. The teacher of the other twin Kenya shared that Kenya's reading level is D which is the goal for the end of kindergarten and that she could write to 100 but had problems with understanding basic place value and double-digit addition without regrouping even with the use of manipulatives. The team decided to retain both girls because they were both significantly below grade level. The team also stated that having additional resources for a year would help lessen the learning gaps currently present. The resource teacher wanted to discuss the retention with mom but wanted Helen present. The second-grade teachers had three more students to discuss, one of whom was newer to the school. They had to leave to pick students up from specials and agreed to meet during specials time the next day to continue the discussion. Helen and I stayed in the meeting area and completed my second interview, which included her responding to scenarios.

**Observation findings.** Helen's observation provided insight into her thinking about student progress and data. It also highlighted her expectations for teachers and support staff. Helen's definition of inclusion conveyed her thoughts of students of all

academic abilities being able to learn together in a classroom if support was provided. During the observation, Helen showed examples of living this personal definition of inclusion. The first example was the female fifth-grade student who qualified for EC services, but the parents declined. Helen did what she felt was beneficial for the student's academic growth and placed the student in the inclusion classroom. In this classroom, students of various ability levels were included, but support was provided by an EC teacher who pushed into the classroom as a co-teacher. Consequently, the student was provided with some support by having two adults providing small group instruction based on individual levels.

The thought of students of all academic abilities being included reached beyond services for students with IEPs receiving support from resource teachers to include students receiving services for English Language Learners as well. This was evident throughout the grade-level retention meetings. The ELL teacher was included in the conversation about student progress because she worked closely with the classroom teacher to make sure her lessons aligned with all the needed skills. An example of this was the conversation held during the third-grade PLC when the ELL teacher shared historical data for the student because she has knowledge from kindergarten to present.

Helen also lived her definition with the intentional formation of the inclusion classrooms. She selected teachers who were equipped and willing to embrace all students and who were also willing to share ownership with the inclusion EC teacher. Additionally, she shared how she worked to make sure the resources needed were provided and that schedules were created that were conducive to learning in an inclusive

setting. The skills required to create/organize the inclusion classrooms mirror the characteristics for inclusive leadership Helen shared during her interview: all students can learn, work to provide support for students and teachers, and modify schedules to benefit the inclusive setting. Helen invited the EC teachers and the ELL teacher to sit in on the retention committee meeting to share their knowledge and recommendations for students they serve. This highlighted the support mentioned in her personal definition of inclusion shared earlier. During the shadowing day, Helen shared information about her desire to have full inclusion in all grade levels, but also shared the difficulty she was having with Kindergarten, first, and second grades due to the intensive needs of some of her younger students. She also celebrated the success of her personal definition of inclusion with her third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students being fully included in all subject areas. Mary also shared the hard work that the regular education teachers and the EC teachers put in to meet the needs of the students.

### **Scenarios**

At the end of the observations, the two principals responded to two scenarios, which are included in the following section, as well as the findings, of how participant scenario responses related to the four themes.

#### **Scenario 1**

Jimmy is a fourth-grade student who is being enrolled in your school from another elementary school in the district. According to mom and his IEP, Jimmy has exited a self-contained classroom due to his notable improvement in behavior and academic progress. Mom shares that she likes to work closely with the school to ensure Jimmy gets the best education possible. Upon further inspection of Jimmy's cumulative record, you discover cases of extreme behavior he exhibited

in the recent past, such as destroying several classroom computers, giving the teacher a black eye, and harming himself. What actions will you take and why?

Mary was able to talk clearly about transitioning Jimmy into the building using the information provided in scenario one. She outlined specific steps, such as looking at the IEP with members of her in-house transition team. She then discussed ways to create support systems so that Jimmy could experience success. The system includes selecting a teacher who is structured but flexible who is willing to follow the plan and goals while being able to adjust as needed to meet student needs in the new environment. She also mentioned creating a support system for the regular education classroom teacher within the school. The excerpt below further explains the thought process Lisa discussed for the transition.

What we would normally do is review his IEP with our resource teacher and the classroom teacher with the mom of course, as part of the IEP team. Any time we have a student transitioning we try to do that in house and review, since the friend has behaviors that are extreme, we're going to have a behavior plan in place before that first day of school or pretty quickly after. It might not be a formal FBA/NBIP, but just to have maybe a check-in/check-out or some processes in place that give him breaks during the day and then of course to make sure that the teacher has support when we create his schedule.

This plan aligned with Mary's personal definition of inclusion and the leadership exhibited during the observation when she shared how she helped two students (fifth grade and pre-kindergarten) transition into her school. She expressed her affinity for students with unique needs, and her desire to make sure needs were met, even if she had to do so herself. She sustained this advocacy as the interview continued, and she shared her thoughts of allowing Jimmy a fresh start. She reiterated the importance of being

prepared for extreme behavior in the event something happens but was optimistic about the student responding appropriately with the correct support in his new setting. In her personal definition, she also mentioned supporting teachers with meeting the needs of students. She discussed how she would provide support for Jimmy's new teacher by being intentional with scheduling.

Like Mary, Helen was able to respond to scenario one with clear steps. Helen has three EC teachers in her school, and the first step in her process is to have the lead EC teacher to examine the IEP to find out about goals and service time. While this is underway, she intentionally selects a teacher who will best meet the needs of the students. She discussed this process already being established in third, fourth, and fifth grade due to her inclusion classrooms already being created. Helen's plan is elaborated upon in the quote below.

When a parent enrolls a student and we find out the student has an IEP, the first person I give that to is our EC lead teacher and she looks through it and finds out where we're supposed to serve, how we're supposed to serve and all of that. Then I try—if number work—to put them in a specific teacher's class; for example, he has some destructive behaviors and I wouldn't put him in a beginner teacher's class that has no clue, so I try to figure out where I can put them if the numbers work in my favor. In fourth grade they work in my favor, because you can go as high as you want, plus if the school year's already started and I already have this inclusion working, then I would want to make sure he's in that schedule where the inclusion is working.

This is aligned with her personal definition of inclusion, which is providing for the needs of all students in the regular education classroom regardless of academic ability. Helen continued discussing the transition for Jimmy, and she mentioned

collecting data to receive a crisis interventionist from the district to help with the transition both for the student and the classroom teacher.

He's harmed himself, he's harmed a teacher, so there might be enough data from another school, I might need to gather more data to look at with EC for maybe crisis intervention to come out and help him transition into our school and to keep data and see what the next steps would be.

Both participants used their personal definitions of inclusion to guide their transition plan for scenario one. Both were able to share action steps without hesitation because they already had working plans for situations like the one described in the scenario due to the district's dismantling of many self-contained settings. When discussing preparation or support for the regular education classroom teachers, both participants referred to in-house methods of training rather than the district. However, Helen mentioned contacting the district for the next steps after collecting data on Jimmy as he transitioned.

## **Scenario 2**

For the last 4 years, your school has worked to include students with disabilities in regular education classrooms with push in support from the three resource teachers with great success. This year Ms. Green a third-year teacher has two students who are included in her classroom with push in support. Since the beginning of the year, Ms. Green has shared concerns with anyone who would listen about not wanting the students in her class and has refused to plan with Mrs. White the resource teacher. In fact, Mrs. White has shared that Ms. Green is struggling and the students may not be receiving all the support they need. What actions will you take?

Mary was also able to outline the steps she should take to address the problem in scenario two. Support for the teacher was again mentioned first. Followed by making

sure Ms. Green understands why inclusion is required for the two students. Next, scheduling was addressed to ensure ample joint time for planning was provided for the special education teacher, the classroom teacher, and the curriculum specialists. Additionally, she proposed allowing the classroom teacher an opportunity to watch inclusion in action. Mary also discussed a possible compromise for the teacher consisting of inclusion and pullout time. Mary's plan is detailed in the excerpt below.

If it's kind of at a place that maybe we can compromise that one time is inclusion and one time is pull out, just to kind of give them support. Just to really create a structured plan with clear expectations of what that inclusion model looks like and what the purpose is, that it's not a tutor and not somebody that's wandering around, they really should be working. Then moving forward, if that's not something that she can do, then that just wouldn't put kids in her room, if possible in that situation. Maybe we'd allow her to see another teacher in the building or maybe somewhere else where the model's working really nicely and how to facilitate that, I think that's always helpful if she's open to that kind of thing.

This response also spoke to one of the characteristics of leadership from inclusion that Mary mentioned—the ability to find allies. This response referred to allowing Ms. Green to watch a classroom environment that implemented inclusion. The teacher in the classroom had been identified as an ally for Mary as she equipped her staff for inclusion.

Helen's response to scenario two starts with an explanation of how she plans for inclusion by purposefully selecting teachers who have the skill and the will to be the inclusion classroom for the grade level during the summer before the start of the school year. Helen also discussed two possible variations for Ms. Green's behavior, but the next steps were not differentiated based on the cause of Ms. Green's behavior. The quote that follows explains the next steps.

There would have to be some conversations with Ms. Green about the students, I think that it would be almost a disciplinary kind of conversation, because I believe that whether you want them or not, they're in your class and you have to do what's right for them and then offer her support. What can I do to help you? What additional resources will you need? Because she's got to change her behavior for them to succeed and if she continues not to then I would reprimand her and I might even consider—depending on how severe it is—moving the students out of the class, to a class where they would get the help that they would need, because the whole year with her, if she's not willing to bend, isn't going to be good for them and really we're doing what's best for kids and we should err on the side of the kid.

Helen focused on making sure student needs were met, and she had a deliberate process in place for selecting teachers to act as the inclusion classroom who were equipped to meet the unique needs of students. If Ms. Green could not meet students' needs, even after support was given, Helen would move the student to a more conducive setting. She was even willing to discipline a teacher for not addressing the needs of the students and for not being aligned with building expectations. This process matches her inclusive definition: allowing students with varying academic needs to be included in general education classes with support.

Mary and Helen had plans to facilitate inclusion. Helen was committed to making sure inclusion is done properly and that all the needs of the students are met. Mary did not make inclusion a non-negotiable. She was willing to allow the student to go back to a more restrictive resource setting. This was contrary to her inclusive definition shared earlier. In the scenario responses, neither teacher specifically required or offered a district-level professional development focused on inclusion but rather depended on the support they could provide for the teacher on the school level. This is aligned with the lack of a specific district definition for inclusion theme discussed in the previous session.



### **Summary**

The participant profiles and settings were shared at the beginning of the chapter to situate an understanding of the participants and their experiences in education. The chapter continued with samples of participant responses and how they related to and helped to develop the themes. Detailed observation notes were included, followed by an explanation of how the themes were demonstrated during the two observations. Finally, two scenarios were included, and participant responses were used to show how the themes were connected as well as personal definitions. In Chapter V, I discuss conclusions for the study related to the research questions. Additionally, I will share suggestions and implications for school districts, administrators, parents, and researchers.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **ANALYSIS, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

Historically, schools have not effectively met the academic and social needs of students who receive special education services due to a disability protected under IDEA. IDEA and NCLB mandates ushered in urgency for current school-level administrators to create inclusive school environments that meet the needs of all students (DeMatthews et al., 2019). In this study, I examined how seven elementary school-level administrators and one district-level administrator define, understand, and actualize inclusion in the elementary school setting. I discovered how the participants live out and share their definition of inclusion in the context of district expectations.

In this chapter, I answer the research questions by revisiting the findings I discussed in detail in Chapter IV. In order to analyze my findings, I discuss how the findings relate to the existing literature in the area of inclusion. Study participant definitions and actions are discussed concerning standards for inclusive leaders. Next, I share implications from this study for practicing educators, school level principals, and researchers. Finally, I share implications for parents and provide an update of my journey as a parent of a daughter protected by IDEA.

#### **Analysis**

The goal of my study was to find out specific information about how school administrators think about inclusion in elementary schools. I used two research questions

and secondary questions to unearth the desired information. In the following sections, I explore how the information gained during the study answers or adds understanding to the research questions. Additionally, I will discuss how literature in the field supports or differs from study findings of inclusive education.

### **Research Question 1: How Do Principals Define and Understand Inclusion?**

A theme that emerged from the data was that there is no one agreed-upon definition of inclusion among the administrators in the study. All participants were able to state their definition of inclusion clearly but agreed that this definition was based on personal experiences as an educator. The findings in this study are aligned to existing research on how inclusion is defined and how it should be implemented within an elementary school general education setting (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Definitions of inclusion vary greatly. Inclusion is sometimes described as an attitude, philosophy, practices, and even as a value (Billingsley et al., 2018). These variations impact overall understandings as evidenced by varied study participant definitions and varied implementation of inclusion in their elementary schools.

Some researchers specifically define inclusion as including students with disabilities in regular education classrooms, which consist of typically developing children who receive instruction based on the adopted standard course of study (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). This is the understanding shared by most research participants. For example, participant Helen defined inclusion as including students with varying needs and academic abilities in regular education classrooms while Shawn's definition referred to including students with IEPs in with the general population.

Although their specific terminology differed, their overall understanding and definitions of inclusion were similar, and both fall in the realm of understanding discussed above.

This general participant understanding was also apparent during the observations and in the scenario responses. For example, Helen's definition of inclusion was visible during the observation and in her responses to the scenarios. For instance, Helen eagerly shared her process for creating inclusive classroom environments in third, fourth, and fifth grade starting with the intentional selection of an appropriate general education teacher during the observation. She reiterated this plan of inclusion once more in her response to scenario one when she stated, ". . . if the school year has already started and I already have inclusion working, then I would want to make sure he's in that schedule where the inclusion is working."

Mary also demonstrated this general participant understanding during her observation and in her scenario responses. During my observation of her in the fifth-grade science class, she talked about the success of inclusion in this class and how she desired it in other classrooms throughout the school to best meet the needs of the student. She continued this thinking during the second interview as she responded to scenario one, as she explained the entry plan below.

What we would normally do is review his IEP with our resource teacher and the classroom teacher with the mom of course, as part of the IEP team. Any time we have a student transitioning we try to do that in house and review, since the friend has behaviors that are extreme, we're going to have a behavior plan in place before that first day of school or pretty quickly after. It might not be a formal FBA/NBIP, but just to have maybe a check-in/check-out or some processes in place that give him breaks during the day and then of course to make sure that the teacher has support when we create his schedule.

Even when participants shared a general understanding of inclusion, there were nuances in their personal definitions of inclusion. Some referred to other student populations such as English Language Learners in their personal definition. Some participants referred to total inclusion within a general education classroom, while others referred to a range of inclusion, including time in the resource room with a special education teacher. Helen's understanding in her words is that "inclusion should be where students of all abilities are allowed to participate in a regular classroom setting with support." John included a variation in thinking in his definition below.

It looks like it's a situation that typically is focused on EC, but it can also be ESL or other types of services when those services are actually pushed into the classroom and you have a true co-teaching model, so that kids that may have disabilities can still get core content, but they're supported from the classroom.

These meaningful variations in personal definitions can also be seen throughout the research. Some researchers focus on the types of inclusion, such as descriptive, prescriptive, and fragmented (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). The descriptive definition is narrowly focused on a specific element or subgroups such as including a specific represented group, for example, students identified on the autism spectrum, while the prescriptive definition is broad and idealistic (Ainscow, 2006). The participants in this study identified more with the prescriptive definition of inclusion and its broad view. This identification is also aligned with my research participants' understanding of what they feel inclusion should look like ideally, but most have not witnessed their definition of inclusion in practice in every classroom, every day at their schools. The participants were able to share some glimpses with examples from particular classrooms or situations

(such as Helen with her third, fourth, and fifth-grade inclusion classes), but participants are still working towards bringing their definitions to fruition. It is important to note in this study that a shared or consensus definition did not emerge from all participants. This finding is also in alignment with research that offers a range of inclusive definitions, but no one clear agreed-upon definition (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014).

It is important to note that participants in this study did not specifically mention academic inclusion in their personal definitions as intended by IDEA mandates. Instead, they attended to physically including protected students in regular education classrooms with support. This support was not specially defined, and its relationship to student academic performance was not discussed. NCLB mandates call for the growth of all students towards mastery of grade-level standards. This was not mentioned by participants as a desire for the implementation of inclusion in their schools.

Another theme that surfaced in the data was that personal definitions of inclusion are not static. Participants shared how their understanding of inclusion changed, expanded, or clarified throughout their careers in education. Some were able to clearly remember a pivotal event that shaped their current definition while others could not attribute the change to a single event. Lisa and Helen were able to pinpoint an experience during their teaching careers that altered their definitions to including students in the regular classroom instead of pulling them out for resource. Lisa recalled a specific fifth-grade student who did not want to be pulled from class for resource and asked her why he had to leave the class, and Helen talked about the stressful feeling of trying to make sure

her six students who were pulled for resource with the EC teacher were sufficiently caught up when they returned to class. Lisa explains,

I definitely think that my very first experiences were—and I had a student who was tired of me pulling him out of a classroom, he was a fifth grader and he asked why and when he asked, I felt like, why am I? When I look at all of your information, you’ve performed just as well in some areas as your non-disabled peers, so why would I be taking you out of that environment versus working collaboratively in that environment? So that’s really honestly where the first initial—if I think about inclusive practices, it started with a student for me.

Other participants refer to continual learning and altering personal definitions of inclusion with the changes in education. Lisa also shared her thoughts on continual change in the quote that follows.

I think that it grows as things within society grow. I think that there’s a lot of factors that play in—I think about environment, I think about academic and I think about social, but within those, there’s also subgroups of things. I personally hope that it continues to evolve; I’m a big advocate and going back to my favorite thing of teaching, once I lose sight of teachers and the impact that the folks who are in front of our students daily, once I lose sight of evolving whether that’s a definition of something or something that’s been implemented, even if it’s implemented well and it still needs to change or evolve or shift, once I lose sight of those things, I’ve always said I don’t know if I want to stay in education.

The changes in personal understandings of inclusion can be seen in research, as perceptions have changed or altered due to the laws and legislations such as Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Sumbera et al., 2014). John refers to continual learning and its importance in education. He feels that if his inclusive definition is fixed, then learning

has ceased, and he is no longer an effective leader. Melinda consistently evaluates and reflects on her definition of inclusion and her school's inclusive practices. This cycle causes her to alter and refine her practices as well as her definition, although this is not overtly stated.

Participants will continue to have experiences as they lead. They understand that they will continue to receive district directives and trainings in the area of inclusion and that societal changes may alter the educational pendulum. The experiences will aid the principals in gaining additional knowledge and skills, which will increase their range and understanding in leading for inclusion (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018). This in turn will cause alterations in their inclusive understandings and, ultimately, their definitions.

### **Research Question 2: How Do Principals Actualize or Live Their Definition of Inclusion?**

In my research, I determined that many factors contribute or add to the principal's ability to actualize or live their personal definition of inclusion. Participants shared their work is multifaceted and it is impacted or influenced by outside sources such as legislation, high stakes testing, district mandates, and stakeholders (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012; Rousmaniere, 2013). The following sub-questions helped explore a few key factors I considered to help understand how principals live their personal definitions of inclusion within the elementary schools that they lead.

**How do principals align their personal definition of inclusion with district expectations?** The participants in this study could not share the district's definition of inclusion. They were also unable to locate the Arrowhead School District's definition or expectations to share during the interviews. Melinda articulated this shortcoming well.



“Our district’s definition? I don’t think that I can state that to you verbatim without having to look it up on the website.” However, the participants know inclusion is the expectation for all students due to some recent district changes. For example, during my observation, Mary shared recent changes in one of her student’s academic placement from a self-contained classroom of four to a general education classroom with resource support. She discussed that there was no transition plan from the district to introduce the student to her school. Like Mary, Shawn and Helen also talked about recent changes that caused students who were in special district classes to return to the homeschools that they lead. They also talked about not knowing how to truly meet the needs of the students because there was not a transition plan or additional training, or resources provided at the school level. Examples like the above, coupled with the dismantling of separate district-level classrooms to support students who are on the general curriculum, but who are sufficiently below grade-level expectations, led to the realization that inclusion is the expectation in the district.

Other participants also reported that in recent years the school district dismantled specialized EC classrooms designed for specific needs such as autism or for students who could not be considered adaptive curriculum students because they knew too much but could not function independently in a regular classroom setting because they were sufficiently behind academically. Participants also talked about providing the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as a positive for students, but also discussed that LRE decisions should be decided individually instead of being based on money for funding to provide specialized settings or to provide instructional assistance to help within a regular

education classroom setting. They feel that decisions made with money in mind first is not best for students. The level of district support is a barrier to developing effective inclusive schools (Billingsley et al., 2018).

DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) understand how districts such as Arrowhead have a difficult time understanding what inclusion is and what federal laws and policies say about when and how to use inclusion. Misunderstandings in what is meant by inclusion and LRE cause districts to enact district-wide policies that may not allow for a continuum of placement for students protected under IDEA, as is the case in ASD. This misunderstanding also leads districts not to offer a specific definition of inclusion for the district or even share how they feel inclusion should look within schools. This lack of clarity explains the variations in the implementation of inclusion within the seven elementary schools in this study, which is also found in research (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

This leads to another theme: inclusion is the expectation, but the district has not shared how inclusion should look at the elementary school level. This is aligned to available research on inclusion because it lacks information, descriptions, and theoretical explanations regarding how leadership for inclusive education truly occurs within schools and a precise definition of what it looks like in practice (Bays & Crockett, 2007). According to the participants, directives are shared by the district, such as to limit pullouts. For example, the district mandates when students can and cannot be taken from regular education classrooms to receive pullout resource services. Participants also shared that the amount of time that the district has approved to pull out students is limited, which

leads resource teachers and principals to create master schedules to allow EC or resource teachers to push in. Participants could not recall receiving professional development from the district on inclusion, and only one participant recalled being offered training. Melinda recalled an optional EC training, but she did not attend it and did not know the exact content covered. John relied on an inclusion training series he received in a previous district to guide his thinking because Arrowhead School District has not provided any training on inclusion during his six years of employment. John elaborated,

In a previous district, they for two or three years had a summer institute specifically surrounded or built around inclusive practices. The PD was actually pretty good, I actually hate they stopped doing them, because I haven't really seen much of it in my current setting.

Despite the ambiguity of the district's definition of inclusion, most participants feel their definition of inclusion is aligned with the district's informal definition in some way. Lisa, a district administrator, shared her thoughts on the district's definition of inclusion. "I think that it varies, and I think it depends on who you're talking to, in all honesty." This vagueness allowed the principals in this study to find a way to agree with the district's definition. This knowledge explains why the participants in the study feel their personal definition is aligned to the district's, or at least to someone in district leadership.

**How do principals share their definition of inclusion with the staff and the community?** Participants in the study discussed various ways their definition of inclusion is shared with staff. One way they mentioned is through managerial tasks such as scheduling. Helen shared, "I think that comes when we're scheduling, so EC gets a

priority of scheduling.” She went on to explain that EC teacher schedules are considered first when creating the master schedule because they must be pushed into each grade level for inclusion, and this means that core subjects for each grade level must be staggered for this to work with the three EC teachers. During my observation, Helen also discussed how specific teachers are selected on each grade level to be the inclusion classroom. She shared how she selected teachers who were willing to think outside of the box, who were willing to learn new ways to differentiate instruction, who were caring, who also have high expectations for all, and, lastly, who were relational and can work well with the EC teacher who would push in to their classrooms. This is aligned to the guidance document created by CCSSO and CEEDAR to focus on the success of students with disabilities under the PSEL standard for professional capacity of school personnel (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Melinda also talked about creating perfect co-teaching environments in order for all students to flourish. She discussed how two co-teaching classrooms differed in her school and shared reasons that possibly cause the differences. She also discussed how she planned to make changes the following academic year to create a more inclusive environment in the third-grade inclusion classroom like the one already established in her fifth grade during my observation.

Co-teaching, in this particular study, refers to a regular classroom teacher and a resource teacher providing instruction within the same classroom where students with IEPs are included. Research on co-teaching identified variables to consider when forming a productive co-teaching situation, including co-teacher compatibility, administrative supports, planning time, teacher training, and flexibility (Scruggs, Mastropieri, &

McDuffie, 2007). Helen and Melinda discussed these factors during their discussions about which teachers should serve as the inclusion classroom instructors. Administrative or principal support is also critical when implementing inclusion within a school. Research states, in order to support the vision of inclusion, another role of the school level principal is to modify and refine school and special education policies, procedures, and schedules to support inclusive education (Agbenyega & Sharma, 2014; Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2019; Frost & Kersten, 2011; Guzman, 1996). The administrators in this study talked about scheduling and personnel consideration in order to implement inclusion within their schools using their varied understandings of inclusion. .

Participants also discussed having a shared school vision, which encompasses the importance of including all. This vision is discussed during staff, professional development, and leadership team meetings. Melinda discussed her living her inclusive vision every day in the quote below.

I think first and foremost it's just setting the stage and setting the scene for expectations and that collective goal and collective vision as to why we're here, why we do what we do. We start off with that at the beginning of the school year and then you just have to live it every day with what we say, what we do, what we share, it's got to be ongoing every single day. We talk about it in staff development, we talk about it in our professional development activities, we talk about it in PLC's, we talk about it in our data discussions, we talk about it in planning sessions, IEP meetings, our EC monthly meetings, so it can't just be down on paper.

Mary and Dawn talked about having crucial conversations about putting student's needs first when making decisions. Dawn took the sentiment further by sharing how she

corrects inappropriate comments or actions that signal out students or staff members who may exhibit various needs. Modeling inclusive thinking and the importance of learning student stories was also discussed as a way to share inclusive definitions with the staff. Participants also reported discussing the rationale behind their decisions about inclusion with staff members.

Most administrators could not articulate specific examples of times they shared their definition of inclusion with general education parents or other community stakeholders. Instead, they reported conversations about inclusion happening during Individual Education Plan meetings with parents as they discussed service times and locations. Some participants felt this lack of sharing with parents and community stakeholders gives the impression of not including all. As a result, some participants made finding ways to talk to community stakeholders about inclusion a personal area to work on in the future.

Mary was the only participant who was able to articulate crucial conversations held with general education parents about inclusion. Her school is in a very small close-knit community where parents know other parents and their kids even before they are school-aged. Families with students who have learning or behavioral differences are quickly identified in the community and are often ostracized by the other parents who do not want their child/children in the same class as students who are different. Due to this culture, Mary has held numerous private conversations with parents about everyone's right to be included in the school community. During these conversations, her definition of inclusion is articulated clearly without divulging personal information about the

student being discussed. Although she held the crucial conversations, Mary did not initiate the conversation as a way of sharing her vision for inclusion in the building. So, like the other participants, she did not openly share her personal definition with the community stakeholders.

Principal leadership for inclusion includes pursuing, cultivating, supporting, and monitoring the communication of staff, students, families, and all other educational stakeholders in the area of inclusive instruction (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Spillane & Lee, 2014). Participants shared that this open communication with parents about inclusion is not the norm in their schools. Communication with all parents and families is imperative in instructional leadership for inclusion. Parents have opinions and educational insights about the education of their students as well as appropriate ways to include students in the regular education classroom. They have questions and understanding, which could lead to greater educational outcomes for all. Nurturing conversations and relationships around inclusion requires finesse and careful planning on the part of the principal in order to build and sustain a rapport with parents of students with disabilities and all parents.

Scholars reiterate the need for teachers, parents, and administrators to be involved as students with disabilities enter regular classrooms to learn side by side with their typical performing peers (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Guzman, 1996). This planning can start at the district level, but the principal must complete the planning work at the school level (Crockett, 2002). Each school has unique student bodies and unique community

stakeholders, which make inclusive planning the work of those in the school as they process what is needed for school-wide implementation of inclusion.

**Revisiting the Conceptual Framework:  
Study Participants in Relation to Leadership Standards for Inclusion**

During the study, participants shared their thoughts on inclusion and how they lead for inclusion. I analyzed data from interviews, observations, and scenario responses throughout this study. In the section that follows, I use this information to explore how participants lead for inclusion concerning the six Professional Standards for Administrators of Special Education (Boscardin et al., 2009), which I identified in Chapter I as my conceptual framework.

*Standard I: Leadership and Policy* was identified as pivotal for principals in leading schools that meet the needs of all students (Boscardin et al., 2009). My study aimed to understand how principals comprehend and lead for inclusion through the decisions they make. Participants in this study who acknowledge they strive to lead inclusive schools relied on personal experiences and district directives to lead. None of the participants in the study mentioned laws or policies such as IDEA or FAPE as guiding posts for leading their schools or forming their inclusive definitions. Melinda did mention knowledge of regular education laws and special education laws as a desirable characteristic for inclusive leadership. However, participants did discuss NCLB and high stakes testing which, in many cases, acted as a catalyst for school leaders in this study to evaluate, reflect, and alter their work with all students since all scores matter (McLaughlin & Ruedel, 2012). Participants did not discuss IDEA or LRE, we can infer, because they lacked knowledge surrounding laws and policies germane to students with



special needs who are protected by IDEA. Research supports the idea that building-level administrators place more emphasis on following or attending to the managerial mandates of IDEA rather than truly understanding what it means (Sumbera et al., 2014).

*Standard 2: Program Development and Organization* was more evident in participant responses and actions, particularly Helen and Melinda. As mentioned in chapter 4 and earlier in chapter 5, Helen discussed a specific process she used to create inclusive classes. She started planning for the year with the schedule for the exceptional children's or resource teachers so other schedules could be created to meet the inclusive needs first. Helen's program included finding the correct regular education teacher to meet the varied special education needs of the students. The intentional selection of general education teachers to be the inclusion classroom for the grade level illustrates a standard expectation for inclusive leaders from guidance documents for PSEL. PSEL Standard 9-Operations and Management lists assigning roles and responsibilities to staff based on staff's ability to optimize meeting the needs of students with a disability as a responsibility of inclusive administrators (Billingsley et al., 2018; DeMatthews et al., 2019). John's desired characteristics for inclusive leaders are also in this line of thought. John mentioned identifying the strengths of teachers in order to match them to student needs. This is what is meant by the guidance document created by CCSSO/CEEDA.

*Standard 3: Research and Inquiry* was not specifically mentioned by participants in this study. Participants referred to learning from the students and families they serve rather than doing independent research on inclusion or even specifically seeking out information from schools that have experienced success with inclusion. Due to the

limited information or support received so far, participants did, however, show interest in receiving more professional development offerings in the area of inclusion from Arrowhead School District. Again, the actions of the administrators are in harmony with research findings, which state that principals depend on the district rather than research to gain a clearer understanding of policies related to inclusion or special education (Garrison, 2005). Research and inquiry into the policies and strategies surrounding special education and inclusion make principals more capable of participating in and implementing inclusion within schools (Garrison, 2005). The lack of research by the administrators in the study may be a barrier to true inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2018).

*Standard 4: Evaluation* refers to formally looking at the implementation of inclusion within a school by using some standards, assessments, or even a rubric. Participants in my study did not make any reference to formally evaluating the entire inclusion implementation process within the schools they lead. However, one participant discussed formally evaluating a teacher and her ability to include all students. Mary discussed evaluating one of her teachers during the school observation. Mary shared that despite specifically including the need for her fifth-grade teacher to find ways to meet the needs of one particular male student with learning needs and scoring her low in differentiation, the teacher's practices and desire to be more inclusive did not change. Mary suggested this lack of effort on the part of the teacher was possibly due to the teacher's upcoming retirement. In discussions with me, participants were able to evaluate their schools regarding the implementation of inclusion informally. Mary explained her evaluation of her school and the implementation of inclusion; "Yes, our car is parked on

the road, you know. Some people are peddling away, and other friends are just sitting, but at least on the road.” The other study participants also shared their current informal assessment of inclusion in their buildings. No study participants shared that their school was successful in including all students in every classroom in the school and that every staff member shared an inclusive vision. Instead, like Mary, all agreed that they were making progress, but they still had lots of work to do to live their definition of inclusion truly.

*Standard 5: Professional Development and Ethical Practice* is critical to inclusive schools. Ethical practices require administrators to understand the history of special education, including equity issues surrounding disproportionalities (DeMatthews et al., 2019). School leaders must work with staff to meet the needs of all students by providing unbiased access to learning. Participants in this study dealt with ethical practices as they shared their personal definition of inclusion, which called for educating students with disabilities with their peers while ensuring access through the use of specific resources, strategies, and personnel.

Shawn explained,

Inclusion is . . . an instructional inclusion model where the EC instruction is happening in tandem with the classroom instruction in the classroom and there’s a partnership between the teacher and the EC teacher and those students have access to not only the general curriculum, but the support systems that they need in order to be more successful with that.

Professional development or learning is essential for principals and staff members who are planning or implementing inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2018). The principal must

ensure teachers are equipped to meet the needs of the students within the school. This requires continual learning or professional development. As administrators notice a specific need or trends related to inclusion, they are responsible for providing professional development for teachers and also to be invested enough to take an active part in the learning (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Study participants did not discuss any school-wide professional development they provided for inclusion. However, during the scenario discussions, both Helen and Mary discussed providing in-house professional development to Ms. Green, the teacher struggling with inclusion. Both participants proposed having Mrs. Green visit the classroom and work with a teacher who has shown success with inclusion. However, taking part in and providing professional development for teachers is an area of growth for the study participants as they continue to lead for inclusion.

*Standard 6: Collaboration* is vital to a flourishing inclusive school. Researchers have found that effective inclusive school level administrators work collaboratively with all stakeholders such as the school improvement team, families, district leaders, and academic consultants in order to gain knowledge or to find out specific strategies to meet the needs of students (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Within the school, it is also imperative for general education and special education teachers to work closely, especially in inclusive classrooms. This collaboration will allow both groups of educators to discuss service delivery models, resources, strategies, and lesson content in order to provide effective instruction and learning opportunities for all.

Participants mentioned this type of collaboration when they discussed the co-teaching model sometimes used in an inclusion classroom. Melinda shared her thoughts on collaboration below.

I think when I think of the term inclusion for our special needs students, I think, about how both the core teacher or general ed curriculum teacher as well as the EC resource teacher and our EC specialists are working together as a team to plan lessons, to reflect on the student data, to organize individualized learning tasks with the students and then also some co-teaching as well within the classroom, so it may be, if it's during whole group instruction, one of either the core teacher or the EC teacher may take the lead of the whole group portion and then when they get into the guided and small group practice, both of the teachers are working within small groups, together.

Study participants did omit a collaborative element in their discussion.

Participants in the study did not focus on families as potential collaborative partners. This partnership has the potential to provide essential information about meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Families are members of the IEP team and are tasked with working to provide the best learning outcomes for students. Collaboration with families, however, should move beyond IEP meetings and impact the total inclusive school environment.

Study participants made some meaningful connections to each of the six standards. However, participants need considerable work in all standards in order to be deemed an effective inclusive leader. The research and inquiry standard is the area of greatest concern because of its impact on the other standards. Without research and inquiry, information about ethics, leadership, and professional development, to name just a few, will not be appropriately addressed by school leaders and, thus, schools.

## **Implications**

In this study, I examined how eight administrators within the same school district define inclusion. I examined their perceptions and experiences regarding how they use their personal definitions with the staff and community stakeholders while navigating the demands of high stakes testing and district expectations surrounding inclusion. The results from this study present implications for inclusion for school-level administrators, researchers, school districts, and parents.

### **Implications for School Level Administrators**

Areas of concern, consideration, and interest emerged from the data in this study and from reading various qualitative studies about principals and their work with inclusion. In the following paragraphs, I discuss principals' responsibilities, beliefs about inclusion, and understandings of inclusion. I also discuss how to implement and lead for inclusion.

**Principals' personal beliefs.** School principals are essential within schools. They are tasked with ensuring all students receive equitable education as promised by NCLB mandates and IDEA. From this study, I determined that the personal experiences, understandings, definitions, and beliefs of school level administrators impacted inclusion in the schools instead of directives from the school district. This is concerning because the participants were left to understand, interpret, and implement inclusion in their schools with little to no guidance from the school district. This caused differences in implementation within the Arrowhead School District and a lack of clarity on what was expected from the district, but more importantly, by law. Unfortunately, this type of

scenario is found in districts and schools throughout the United States, where principals' perceptions about inclusion are used to implement or not implement inclusive practices or policies at the school building level (Sumbera et al., 2014).

Inclusive education requires the incorporation of both special education leadership knowledge as well as general educational leadership knowledge; in short, inclusive leadership is at the juncture of both special and regular administration (Boscardin et al., 2009; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Practicing administrators need to be aware of this as they attempt to create/make/implement inclusion in schools. They need to reflect on their own definition of inclusion and how it was created because negative perceptions can halt the creation of inclusion; conversely, positive thoughts can help inclusion flourish. Administrators, both practicing and future, should explore their biases and beliefs about inclusion. This can be done in a variety of ways, such as completing a belief survey or questionnaire on perceptions or thoughts on inclusion and reflecting on the results and their implications on leadership. Another option is attending a leadership institute or seminar which will aid in developing and reflecting on personal leadership styles and beliefs that lead to, or that may hinder inclusion. Schools of Education also offer classes on improving leadership for school administrators, and it is my hope that courses will be designed especially for school leaders on inclusion and meeting the needs of all. As a practitioner, I have taken or participated in all of the above suggestions as a way to improve my leadership and personal beliefs about inclusion, which I have used to guide my decisions as a principal, teacher, and parent.

**Guidance on inclusion for school-level administrators.** School administrators also need to seek additional guidance in order to truly understand what is being asked for by IDEA and NCLB. This guidance can come from professional development offerings on Special Education Law and Policy provided by the school district or a local principal consortium. However, in this study, this type of professional development was not offered, but this does not negate the responsibility of the principals to be knowledgeable about special education laws and policies. As such, other avenues are available to enhance inclusive leadership such as college courses on inclusion and Special Education Law which are offered by universities who offer a degree in School Administration or District Leadership. Principals can also create professional networks with other professionals to find what the law requires for true inclusion.

**How to implement inclusion in elementary schools.** In this study participants reiterated the need to know or to see what inclusion should look like in an elementary school setting. Participants wanted to make sure they were moving in the right direction with implementing inclusion in their schools. However, no principal shared any avenues they used to try to locate needed information. No one talked about reaching out to the district or even to each other to come up with what inclusion should look like at the elementary school level. Participants did not discuss information from personal professional developments or trainings, information or learning on inclusion from college courses, or even from professional readings. Instead, participants focused on what the district expected to see or experiences they had as a teacher or principal.



School leaders must find various avenues in order to implement and nurture inclusion if districts like Arrowhead do not have an operational definition of inclusion. Practicing administrators may locate schools that are successful with inclusion even within their own district by talking to district level personnel in the Exceptional Children's Department. They can also network through professional organizations or read educational literature on inclusion to locate schools who are inclusion champions. Digital education communities can also be used to locate schools or school leaders who have a firm handle on inclusion within their school buildings. Once located, school principals should visit the identified schools to observe daily operations and to talk to the school leader about what has been done to foster an inclusive environment and to avoid pitfalls. This information will give school principals the needed information to at least start the planning process within their school building. Frameworks exist that can be used to assist in the process of leading for inclusion, such as the Star Model. It uses five core principles: ethical practice, individual consideration, equity under the law, effective programming, and establishing productive partnerships to guide planning and implementation decisions (Crockett, 2002). However, since individual schools have unique circumstances, it may be necessary for the school leader to use a plan or format they have used successfully in the past to implement other systematic changes.

### **Implications for the District**

The participants in this study were verbal about the lack of directions Arrowhead School District provided them for inclusion even though inclusion was the expectation. In order for schools within a district to share a common inclusive understanding, the district

leadership must clearly define what inclusion is, how it should be implemented at each level, and how it should look in practice. Achieving this shared understanding will take lots of research and planning on the part of the district. Once the definition is operational or working, then the real work of adjusting district policies and overall operations to be aligned to the district definition begins. DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014) followed an urban school district's journey to implement changes in special education policies and school level implementation. This study offers some insight into ASD.

**School needs assessment/professional development.** Schools within school districts have varying levels of inclusive understanding and inclusive implementation, as demonstrated in the case of ASD and the study participants. As such, districts attempting to implement district-level changes need to complete a comprehensive needs assessment to determine what professional development is needed district-wide and specifically at the school level. Once the data is collected, professional development sessions should be created to start the transition. This training should start with the leaders of the schools first and then continue to the staff. The school leaders need to be aware of district expectations first in order to effectively lead school-level changes. The training should be continual and modified as needed based on data collected throughout the process.

**District special education or inclusion coaches.** Educators attend a myriad of professional development offerings yearly. Some are required while others are for personal professional growth. Educators have great intentions of using information or strategies gained from the professional development offerings into their leadership or classroom practices. Sadly, this sometimes does not happen because educators become

inundated with the day-to-day tasks and are not held accountable for the knowledge gained. District coaches can be used to ensure this does not happen with a district's effort to change inclusive practices district-wide. Coaches can form productive working relationships with schools and help them to problem solve school level issues surrounding inclusion. They can also hold them accountable to put learning into practice.

**Budgeting.** Large scale changes within school districts such as Arrowhead require additional funding. Districts can opt to have an outside agency complete a comprehensive needs assessment on inclusion. This, of course, requires funding. Once the agency completes the work and suggests the next steps, funding will be needed to implement suggestions. For example, providing quality professional development for inclusion will require additional funding to locate suitable services and additional funding to carry out the training for leaders and teachers in the district. Once the implementation is underway, additional funding will be needed to ensure true implementation, such as the coach mentioned in the previous section. The urban school district in DeMatthews and Mawhinney's (2014) study did not offer great insight in the area of budgeting because many participants were wary of discussing how and if budgeting impacted the implementation of IDEA. Nonetheless, districts like ADS should consider the additional cost associated with changes in the district's understanding of inclusion and related expenses.

### **Implications for Researchers**

Researchers should continue to investigate how practicing school principals define, understand, and implement inclusion. This study only scratched the surface of

how school administrators form personal definitions of inclusion and how they use this definition to lead. Future studies should select a broader range of research participants and do more to unearth the personal beliefs of principals through belief surveys or questionnaires and examine how these beliefs impact how they lead inclusion.

Researchers and practitioners should examine how specific actions and decisions are made at the school level for students with disabilities. The involvement of community stakeholders such as the School Leadership Team, parents, and staff in the implementation of inclusion is an area that has valuable information to offer researchers about how and why inclusive decisions are made (Salisbury & McGregor, 2005).

School administrator preparation programs impact how and if principals are equipped to lead schools that embrace all learners. Future research should explore how principal preparation programs address personal beliefs on inclusion, how to implement inclusion, reflective practices, and how to understand special education laws and policy in a real-world context (Goor et al., 1997). Participants in this study did not mention college or university courses as impacting their inclusive definitions. A course in special education or special education law is a requirement for some principal preparation programs, and if it is not, it should be. Specific studies need to be done to examine the requirements for principal preparation or school administration programs in the areas of special education with a particular focus on what information or understanding of inclusion is encompassed.

### **Implications for Parents**

Fear and not knowing are natural responses for parents who have children with disabilities. It was my response with my daughter Brooke, even as an educator. But not knowing is an invitation and charge to parents to learn about the rights of their sons or daughters to quality education in the least restrictive environment if the students are protected by IDEA legislation. It also means that parents have a voice in educational decisions and should be seen as a partner by the school. Linking up with a parent support agency such as the *Exceptional Children's Assistance Center* is critical and can aid in acquiring the previously mentioned information. Parent organizations offer a variety of services and resources to help families navigate schools and education such as parent trainings and workshops, parent to parent support, referral services, lending libraries, and experts in special education policies.

This study did not specifically research parents and their thoughts about inclusion at the elementary level or even thoughts about the personal definition of inclusion for school principals. However, this study offers implications for parents to consider. First, parents should consider the district's and, more importantly, the school's stance on inclusion. They should know the type of classrooms in which their students are being educated, and how the staff is equipped to deal with the demands of including all. Parents of students who have learning needs or students who are protected under IDEA have an even greater obligation to ensure their student is receiving a quality education which means their individual needs are met according to their IEP and that they are being supported as they are instructed using grade-level standards and curriculum. As such,

parents should be able to ask questions and articulate concerns during IEP meetings and other school meetings. Parent support organizations such as the one discussed earlier can assist parents in making sure their voices are heard. Parent voices are necessary because parents have opinions and educational insight into the education of their students as well as appropriate ways to include students in the regular education classroom. The home–school connection will help create the best learning outcomes for students.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations of this study, as with all studies, regardless of the careful attention to design and the fidelity of how the research is conducted. Interpretation of data and the selection of the methodology are areas of restriction in this study. The limitations will be shared below with suggestions on how qualitative research in this area can overcome or correct some limitations found in this study.

One limitation of this study is that it focused only on how administrators define, implement, and share thoughts on inclusion within the context of high stakes testing and district expectations. Teacher and parent understandings and definitions of inclusion, although valuable, were not explored through the interviews and observations in this study. The experiences and understanding of school administrators and one district administrator were given priority, but their understandings, definitions, and lived experiences do not comprise everything that should be explored about how principals live their definition of inclusion. More knowledge, learning, and understanding is available to discover from other perspectives. As a researcher, I accept what the participants shared as

valuable data because this research aimed to understand how principals live or actualize their personal definitions of inclusion.

Another limitation is that only eight participants (seven elementary school administrators and one district administrator) were included in this study. This was intentional due to the nature of this multi-case study with phenomenological elements. Case studies approach research with a laser-like focus on an organization, task, or person (Lichtman, 2013). The case study is a way to understand real-life situations and experiences in context, and case studies also provide a way to view practices as they unfold (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Phenomenological studies traditionally have a smaller number of participants due to the in-depth interviews (Lichtman, 2013). As a result, data obtained in this study cannot be used to generalize information for all elementary school principals, as is the case in research with larger participant numbers. Instead, the findings from this study should be used in conjunction with previous and future research on how principals understand, define, and lead for inclusion as a way to understand how to create and lead inclusive schools.

A third limitation is the sampling method used to locate participants. The purpose of this study was to seek a clearer understanding of how the selected participants defined and understood inclusion within an elementary school setting, what factors affected their definition, and how they shared or disseminated this definition to the staff and community stakeholders within one school district in the eastern part of the United States. As such, my study focused on the information-oriented selection process (Flyvbjerg, 2006). Participant years within the district and in education varied, but currently working

in the same school district accounts for similarities in understanding the district's definition of inclusion. However, similarities and variations do not account for all elementary school principals in the school district.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my purpose in conducting this study was to grasp how principals understand, define, live, and share their definition of inclusion daily. Through interviews and observations, I examined how seven elementary school-level administrators and one district-level administrator balanced or blended their personal definitions of inclusion with district expectations, as well as how they addressed the obligations ushered in by state testing. Lastly, I explored how each administrator communicated their definition of inclusion with staff, parents, and the greater community. The participants were able to share their personal definitions of inclusion, how they were formed, and how they changed over time, although inclusive definitions differed. All participants valued or understood why inclusion is the expectation of the district but were unclear of how this inclusive vision looks in practice due to the vagueness of the district's definition of inclusion and expectations. Participants had mixed feelings about how high-stakes testing affects how they define and live their inclusive definition. Participants provided clear examples of how they shared their definition of inclusion with staff members and with the parents of students who are protected under IDEA. However, most were unable to state how they shared their inclusive thinking with the families of students who do not receive EC services or with the greater community. Although understanding was garnered from this study, continued research is needed in this area.



### **Final Thoughts: My Journey with Brooke**

My daughter Brooke was born in 2008 and was diagnosed with bilateral hearing loss caused by a defect in her inner ear known as Mondini Malformation. Her birth thrust me into the world of special education. Despite the fact I was an educator, I was lost when she became school-aged because I feared the unknown. I did not know how or if she would be accepted into a regular kindergarten classroom by the teacher and the students, or if she would be seen as too different because of her soft pink hearing aids, or if she would be seen by the teacher as an added responsibility. Despite the fears, I became her voice and her educational advocate because as a teacher I knew what she needed to be successful in elementary school academically. I also knew that I had information to offer the school because I was her first teacher. I became visible at her school, making sure they saw me often. I also linked up with various parent support organizations in the community to find out what rights I have as a parent. Fast forward to 2020, Brooke is now in middle school, and she has experienced many successes. She is considered proficient in all academic areas according to school grading and state end-of-grade testing. During her fifth-grade year, she advocated not to be pulled from class by the new EC teacher, but rather for the teacher to push into her classroom as she was accustomed. The EC teacher was a little hesitant because this was not her preferred instructional method, but after I contacted the principal and assistant principal about what the IEP stated, it was corrected and the teacher became more comfortable with inclusion. During this journey, Brooke has learned to advocate for herself and to ask questions. With

continued support from myself and my husband, I am certain Brooke will have a wonderful middle school experience.

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## APPENDIX A

### RECRUITMENT EMAIL

**To:**

**From:** [sjmitche@uncg.edu](mailto:sjmitche@uncg.edu) Shanta Buchanan, Doctoral Student

**Subject:** Research Participation Invitation: Leadership for Inclusive Schools: A Multi-Case Study with Phenomenological Elements

This email message is an approved request for participation in a doctoral research study project. “The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.”

**What is the study about?**

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to examine the thought processes of principals who practice leadership for inclusion. Through document analysis, interviews, and observations I will examine how elementary principals balance or blend their personal definitions of inclusion with district expectations as well as how they address the obligations ushered in by state testing.

**Do you meet the following inclusion criteria:** Do you work in a school district in or near the Piedmont Triad and you are currently employed in one of the following positions: exceptional children’s director, a leader within the exceptional children’s department, or an elementary school principal?

**Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?**

“There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.”

**Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?**

“There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.”

**Questions?**

If you have questions, want to participate, or have suggestions, please contact Shanta Buchanan, principal investigator or Dr. Craig Peck, faculty advisor who may be reached at (336) 707-1158 or [sjmitche@uncg.edu](mailto:sjmitche@uncg.edu) and 336-908-7262 or [c\\_peck@uncg.edu](mailto:c_peck@uncg.edu) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.


Thank you for your consideration.

Shanta Buchanan, MSA, Ed.S  
Doctoral Student




## APPENDIX B

### RECRUITMENT FLYER




**Do you want to tell your inclusive leadership story?  
Well if so.....**



**PARTICIPANTS ARE NEEDED FOR A  
RESEARCH STUDY ON LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION IN  
ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS**

**OBSERVATION**  
3 hours



**INTERVIEW(S)**  
45-60 minutes

**DOCUMENT ANALYSIS**

#### What is the study about?

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to examine the thought processes of principals who practice leadership for inclusion. Through document analysis, interviews, and observations I will examine how elementary principals balance or blend their personal definitions of inclusion with district expectations as well as how they address the obligations ushered in by state testing. “The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.”

#### Why are you asking me?

Do you meet the following inclusion criteria: You work in a school district in or near the Piedmont Triad and you are currently employed in one of the following positions: exceptional children’s director, a leader within the exceptional children’s department, or an elementary school principal?

#### Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?

“There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.”

#### Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

“There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study.”

#### Questions?

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Shanta Buchanan, principal investigator or Dr. Craig Peck, faculty advisor who may be reached at (336) 707-1158 or [sjmitche@uncg.edu](mailto:sjmitche@uncg.edu) and 336-908-7262 or [c\\_peck@uncg.edu](mailto:c_peck@uncg.edu) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

## APPENDIX C

### RECRUITMENT TELEPHONE SCRIPT

Hello, my name is Shanta Buchanan a doctoral student from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in the ELC Department.

This phone call is an approved request for participation in a doctoral research study. "The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants."

Can I share information about the study to see if you are interested and qualify for this research?

If the person says, "No," thank you for your time. *(End the call.)*

If the person says, "yes," Great!

This is a research project. Your participation is voluntary. The purpose of this study is to examine the thought processes of principals who practice leadership for inclusion. Through document analysis, interviews, and observations I will examine how elementary principals balance or blend their personal definitions of inclusion with district expectations as well as how they address the obligations ushered in by state testing.

Do you work in a school district in or near the Piedmont Triad and you are currently employed in one of the following positions: exceptional children's director, a leader within the exceptional children's department, or an elementary school principal? If so you can participate in this research study.

"There are no direct benefits to participants in this study."

"There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this study."

If you are interested in participating in this study and would like to set up a time to meet to sign a consent form or to find out more information that would be great.

*(Schedule a convenient time and location for a meeting to provide more information or to have the consent signed.)*

If you don't have time to schedule now, please contact me Shanta Buchanan, principal investigator or Dr. Craig Peck, faculty advisor who may be reached at (336) 707-1158 or [simitche@uncg.edu](mailto:simitche@uncg.edu) and 336-908-7262 or [c\\_peck@uncg.edu](mailto:c_peck@uncg.edu) from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thank you for your consideration.

Have a great day!

## **APPENDIX D**

### **DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EDUCATION SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

My name is Shanta Buchanan and I am a doctoral student in the ELC department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I have an interest in leadership for inclusion in elementary schools as a result of my 16 years in education as well as my experiences as the mother of an 8 year old daughter who has special needs and who attends a regular elementary school. My research will consist of interviews with special education directors and principals as well as observations, and document analysis.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please read and sign the consent form which offers a little more information about the study.

Recording will start now.

#### ***General Questions***

1. Can you share a little about your background which has led you to this position?

#### ***Definition of inclusion***

2. How do you define inclusion?
3. What experiences or information informed this definition?
4. Does high stakes testing (North Carolina EOGs) influence this definition?
5. Has your personal definition or understanding of inclusion changed over time?
6. Does high stakes testing (North Carolina EOGs) influence this definition?
7. Has your personal definition or understanding of inclusion changed over time?
8. If so, what factors contributed to this change?
9. Do you feel stratified with your current definition of inclusion?
10. Why or Why not?

#### ***Actualizing or Living the definition***

11. Does your personal definition impact how you lead? If so, how?

12. Can you share a specific example of how you used your definition of inclusion to guide an action or make a decision?
13. Without the use of your definition how might the decision above been different?

***District Definition of Inclusion***

1. What is the district's definition of inclusion?
2. Is your personal definition aligned with the district's definition? Please explain.
3. If your personal definition of inclusion and the definition of the district are not aligned, how do you navigate both?

***Characteristics of Leadership for Inclusion***

4. Can you think of any principals who exercise leadership for inclusion in elementary schools?
5. What are some characteristics of their leadership?
6. Can you provide examples from their daily leadership practices which highlight the aforementioned characteristics?
7. Are there characteristics of leadership for inclusion you feel that the practicing principals lack?
8. If so, how can the district help them to strengthen or develop the deficient inclusive leadership characteristics?

***Probing Questions***

- a. Can you tell me more about that?
- b. What do you mean by.....?
9. Do you have anything that you want to add that we have not talked about?

## APPENDIX E

### ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 1 QUESTIONS

My name is Shanta Buchanan and I am a doctoral student in the ELC department at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. I have an interest in leadership for inclusion in elementary schools as a result of my 16 years in education as well as my experiences as the mother of an 8 year old daughter who has special needs and who attends a regular elementary school. My research will consist of interviews with special education directors and principals as well as observations, and document analysis.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please read and sign the consent form which offers a little more information about the study.

Recording will start now.

#### *General Questions*

1. Can you share a little about your background which has led you to this position?

#### *How do principals define and understand inclusion?*

2. How do you define inclusion?
3. What experiences or information informed this definition?
4. Does high stakes testing (North Carolina EOGs) influence this definition?
5. Has your personal definition or understanding of inclusion changed over time?
6. If so, what factors contributed to this change?
7. Do you feel stratified with your current definition of inclusion?
8. Why or Why not?

#### *How do principals actualize or live their definition of inclusion?*

9. Does this definition impact how you lead? If so, how?
10. Can you share a specific example of how you used your definition of inclusion to guide an action or make a decision?

11. Without the use of your definition how might the decision above been different?

***How does the context of high stakes testing affect their ability to live out their inclusive definition?***

12. Do you feel that high stakes testing has affected your inclusive definition? If so, how?

13. Has high stakes testing and accountability had an effect on your daily leadership practices? If so, how?

14. Do you feel the effects have been positive or negative in regards to inclusion? Please explain.

***How do principals align their personal definition with district expectations?***

15. What is the district's definition of inclusion?

16. Is your personal definition aligned with the district's definition?

17. If your personal definition of inclusion and the definition of the district are not aligned, how do you navigate both?

***How do principals share their definition with the staff and the community?***

18. How do you share this definition or vision with those you lead?

19. How do you share this definition or vision with parents and the greater community?

***Leadership for inclusion***

20. Can you think of any other principals who exercise leadership for inclusion at the elementary school level?

21. Are there characteristics of leadership for inclusion you feel that you would like to improve upon?

***Probing Questions:***

- a. Can you tell me more about that?
  - b. What do you mean by.....?
22. Do you have anything that you want to add that we have not talked about?



**APPENDIX F****ELEMENTARY SCHOOL PRINCIPAL SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW 2  
QUESTIONS****Follow-up to Interview 1 and the Observation**

Hello thank you for agreeing to meet with me again. Remember that it is your right to discontinue participation in this study at any time.

Recording can start now.

Do you have any questions for me regarding your initial interview or the observation?

***Interview 1 Follow-up***

1. You mentioned the following in our first interview \_\_\_\_\_; can you talk more about that thought?
2. Is there anything you thought of after our initial interview that you would like to share?
3. Have you thought of any additional characteristics about leadership for inclusion since our last interview that you would like to share?

***Observation Follow-up***

4. Here is what I saw during the observation \_\_\_\_\_, can you tell me what you were thinking when this took place?
5. Can you share how you prioritized your actions in the observed situation?
6. Is there anything that took place prior to the observed event that might shed additional light on the situation?
7. How did you use your definition of inclusion in the above mentioned situation?

*I am going to share 2 short scenarios and I want you to respond to. Explain your thinking as you process the information. Assign priorities to your suggested actions.*

(The participant will be given a written copy of the scenarios and the researcher will read the scenarios aloud allowing process time between the reading of each scenario.)

**Scenario 1** Jimmy is a fourth grade student who is being enrolled in your school from another elementary school in the district. According to mom and his IEP, Jimmy has exited a self-contained classroom due to his notable improvement in behavior and academic progress. Mom shares that she likes to work closely with the school to ensure Jimmy gets the best education possible. Upon further inspection of Jimmy's cumulative record you discover cases of extreme behavior he exhibited in the recent past, such as destroying several classroom computers, giving the teacher a black eye, and harming himself. What actions will you take and why?

**Scenario 2** For the last 4 years, your school has worked to include students with disabilities in regular education classrooms with push in support from the three resource teachers with great success. This year Ms. Green a third-year teacher has two students who are included in her classroom with push in support. Since the beginning of the year, Ms. Green has shared concerns with anyone who would listen about not wanting the students in her class and has refused to plan with Mrs. White the resource teacher. In fact, Mrs. White has shared that Ms. Green is struggling and the students may not be receiving all the support they need. What actions will you take?

**APPENDIX G**  
**OBSERVATION PROTOCOL**

*Observation Protocol*

**Leadership for Inclusive Schools  
Observation Protocol**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Time:** \_\_\_\_\_ **School Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal/Staff Member:** \_\_\_\_\_

General/ Environment Description

How is inclusion being discussed or implemented? How many classes/ students are being affected?

(Adapted from Peck, Kappler-Hewitt, Mullen, Lashley, Eldridge, & Douglas, 2015)

**Key**

P: Policy

L: Law

S: Scheduling

Sp: Student Placement

D: Data (subgroup)

Specify the type of interaction/ meeting. Draw classroom set-up if applicable.

## APPENDIX H

### A PRIORI CODES

The process of creating **codes** can be predetermined—sometimes referred to as deductive or “**a priori**”—or emergent, or a combination of both. Predetermined **coding** may be based on a previous **coding** dictionary from another researcher or key concepts in a theoretical construct. Sep 16, 2014

1. Understanding of inclusion
2. Personal definition of inclusion
3. Formation of definition
4. Definition Changes
5. Lived definition (examples)
6. Personal definitions impact on leadership
7. Personal definition shared
  - a. Families
  - b. Greater community
8. Characteristics of leadership for inclusion
9. Missing leadership Characteristics
10. Alignment of definitions (personal and district)
11. District definition of inclusion
12. Effect of High stakes testing
  - a. Positive
  - b. Negative)
13. Identity (emergent)
  - a. Personal
  - b. Student Label
14. Collaboration for Instruction (emergent)
15. Balance (emergent)
16. Coteaching (emergent)
17. Resistance (emergent)
18. Data (emergent)
19. Shared Responsibility (emergent)

#	A Priori Codes	Abbrev.	Coding Color
1	Understanding of Inclusion	UI	
2	Personal Definition of Inclusion	PDI	
3	Formation of Definition	FD	
4	Lived Definition (examples)	LD	
5	Definition Changes	DC	
6	Personal Definitions Impact on Leadership	IL	
7	Personal Definition Shared <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Families</li> <li>b. Greater Community</li> <li>c. Staff</li> </ul>	DS-F DS-C DS-S	
8	Characteristics of Leadership for Inclusion	CLI	
9	Missing Leadership Characteristics	MLC	
10	Alignment of Definitions (personal and district)	AD	
11	District Definition of Inclusion	DDI	
12	Effect of High Stakes Testing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Positive</li> <li>b. Negative</li> </ul>	ET-P ET-N	
13	Identity (emergent) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Personal</li> <li>b. Student Label</li> </ul>	I-P I-SL	
14	Collaboration for Instruction	C	
15	Balance	B	
16	Coteaching	CT	
17	Resistance	R	
18	Data	D	
19	Shared Responsibility	SR	